

I need you now (but I don't know you yet)

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by [BialyLis](#)

Summary

"What's his name?" Wilbur asked because of course he asked, because he was himself, absolutely unable to sense that very serious negotiations were taking place right next to him. Techno was eager to kick him for it.

Phil, on the other hand, smiled broadly.

"Tommy," he said, and oh, Techno didn't like that tone a lot, that note of affection, as if by some miracle he had already attached himself to the baby before he saw it in front of his eyes. It couldn't be worse. "He's six."

Ah. So it was worse.

Or;

Techno never wanted another brother.
And he's about to make it everyone's problem.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

So, my relation with this story is literally "Started making it. Had a breakdown. Bon Appetite."

I still can't decide if I like it or not, but I'm too far, there's no way back now. Sooo... Here it is!

Techno knew from the beginning that something was wrong. Phil never took them on vacation in June, not with the specter of upcoming exams on the horizon and a mountain of his own assignments. Techno sensed the trick as soon as the word 'camping' was mentioned, but naively ignored all logic and let himself be seduced by the promise of a few days of peace and quiet, far from his friends stressed out by school and his own textbooks. It's their tradition, after all. Traditions are untouchable and cannot be misused. Phil would never fool them like this.

So while everything was a little weird and not particularly sensible, and even Wilbur looked a bit suspicious, they all pretended that red flags were just an element of the landscape and a mirage.

He would be lying if he said he wasn't having a good time. Even if Wilbur complained that the lake water was still too cold for swimming, the rain caught them far beyond the camp a few times and the sun stubbornly refused to come out from behind the clouds, and on the third day Techno ran out of the dry sweatshirts and he had to sneak a few of his brothers. They were a bit too narrow at the shoulders, and the sleeves were far behind his fingertips, but it didn't matter as they sat by the fire, roasting marshmallows and trying to stab each other with sticks.

"If you hurt yourself, I won't feel sorry for you," Phil warned them as he confiscated the murder weapons, but it was hard to take him seriously as he glanced over at the first aid kit.

"Of course you will," Wilbur said, already reaching back for another stick. He still had colored bandages on his knees, because apparently being clumsy and getting into thorny bushes could lead to severe infection, bleeding out and death. "You love us way too much to not feel sorry for us."

Phil scowled at him, but it was hard not to notice that his eyes softened quickly and a smile appeared on his lips.

"I definitely do," he admitted, and even though his tone was playful and it wasn't a direct confession, Techno looked away anyway, pulling his sweatshirt up to his nose to hide that he was blushing.

He should be used to it by now. It should be the norm for him that Phil would say such things sometimes, and that he was always honest about it no matter the circumstances. But he still remembered the same sincere and much less pleasant things that he had listened to for years and still expected at times. When he heard footsteps in the corridor and instinctively looked for a hiding place. When he came home from school and froze for a second with his hand on the doorknob, listening for the screams. And sometimes he even flinched when someone suddenly put a hand on his shoulder. He'd had two long years to get used to being safe, and yet there were still days when he just couldn't believe it and looked for a trick in everything.

Phil never complained. He never reminded him that he was running away from touch, that he was able to remain silent for days, that he sometimes closed in on himself or was angry for no reason at all. That sometimes he would wake up in a bad mood and do absolutely anything to spoil the day for everyone around him. That he once threw a plate against the wall and then just cried out like he was the victim. That sometimes he was unbearable on purpose and tried with all his strength to cross some invisible line, because something in his head had stopped working, something had changed in it, and he suddenly desperately needed to prove that he didn't deserve it all. He doesn't deserve to be happy, he doesn't deserve to be safe, he doesn't deserve Phil to pull his own fingers away from painfully torn hair, to hold them tightly in his hands, to hug him, comfort him, and repeat that everything will be fine.

Because sometimes Techno just didn't believe him. Sometimes it took a long time to remember that he really was safe and loved. And even more, to stop being ashamed of the fact that he still has to be reassured about it.

Phil had once shown him an interview with astronauts who had spent way too long in orbit and forgot how gravity works. They tried to hang mugs and pens in the air, and each time they looked genuinely amazed when the object fell to the ground instead of levitating quietly.

"You do that too, sometimes." Phil rested his chin on the top of his head as he swiped finger across the screen of the phone to play the video again. Techno, still crying, his sleeves carelessly rubbed against his cheeks and reddened eyes, gripped his fingers tighter on his forearms. "Not literally," he added quickly. "But sometimes you forget that the world works a little differently from what you're used to."

Techno didn't take his eyes off the screen, but the more he tried to understand, the worse he felt.

"But I wasn't in space," he said dryly.

Phil exhaled slowly.

"No," he admitted, leaning in to kiss his hair. "But you've been to a lot of very, very bad places. And that's about the same difference as between Earth and space."

Techno didn't feel like an astronaut at all. He felt like a goddamn alien tossed on a sudden alien planet. But the arms around him were strong and warm and able to protect him from anything, so maybe it didn't matter where he was from or how much he stood out from the rest. Maybe it was just that he matched his family - small, abnormal, and sewn together from various elements.

He couldn't sleep that night. Maybe because of the air, cool and damp, maybe because all the animals of the night have resolved to remind them of their existence, or maybe because of Wilbur rolling from side to side in his sleeping bag. Whatever the reason, Techno lay on his back, staring at the roof of the tent, feeling absolutely anything but sleepy, before finally, annoyed, disentangling himself from his own sleeping bag, pulled on his boots and opened the zipper. He tried to be as quiet as possible, which turned out to be completely unnecessary, since Phil was awake as well. He sat by the fire, staring at the dying flames with such intense thought as if he were trying to fuel them by sheer willpower. When Techno cleared his throat loudly, he jumped in place and grabbed his heart.

"God, kiddo...!" He took a deep breath, shaking his head. "Someday you'll be the death of me, you'll see."

He tried to look stern, but quickly gave it up and shifted so the boy could sit next to him on the fallen log. Techno didn't need a special invitation.

"I'm not a kid anymore," he muttered, because he was really thirteen, practically an adult, even if the law said otherwise.

And Phil, apparently, too, because he just looked at him with fondness.

"You'll always be my little sleepy boy," he assured, ruffling his hair, which was utterly unacceptable and undermining all adulthood, and maybe a little too nice to just push his hand away.

"If you say so..."

They sat in silence for a moment, listening to the crackle of the fire and warming their hands, while the chill wind left goose bumps on their backs. Before Phil took them camping for the first time, Techno had never really stared at the sky at night. First, because he had spent most of his life in a city where the lights of houses and street lamps effectively obscured the stars, partly because he had never thought of it. Nothing in the sky could change his situation in any way. But now, in the forest, far from the city, in the little patch of sky between the treetops, the stars seemed even brighter than in books and movies.

"Do you think I'm a good father?"

Techno blinked, completely confused. At first he thought he had misheard, but when he looked at Phil, his expression was serious and expectant.

"Um... Yes?" He shifted nervously, not quite sure what answer he expected from him. "I wouldn't be here if you weren't, would I?"

Phil looked at him for a moment longer, as if intensely searching for something, and Techno wasn't entirely sure if he liked this conversation. He didn't mind saying nice things (though,

to tell the truth, Wilbur was much better at it), and he really felt that of all the people in the world Phil deserved the assurance that he had done a great job. But there was too much desperation in his voice and gaze to consider the question entirely normal. Of course, he had this kind of breakdown at times, Techno was pretty sure anyone would go mad if he had to deal with him and Wilbur for days on end, but he had never shown it so directly.

Techno cleared his throat and moved a little closer, despite the awkward atmosphere.

"I'm serious. You're... okay. Really. Very okay." He shrugged. "You're the best parent I've ever had. And there was a bunch of them."

Phil smiled, but he didn't look really happy.

"That's not a particularly great achievement," he remarked, and okay, there was a lot of point in that, but Techno had never said he was good at comforting, and if he knew they were going to talk about feelings, he would have taken Wilbur with him. Or he would have stayed in the tent and sent his brother to the front alone. Could he still do this? Would it be mean if he just went away and sent in a replacement? Maybe no one would notice...

He scraped his boots against the ground, kicking several smaller stones aside.

"I guess," he admitted. "But that's still something, right? And, well..." He shuffled his legs a second time, this time kicking a lump of dirt straight into the fire. "I don't know, you're good to me. You've always been good." He pulled up the long sleeves of his blouse, staring at his feet. "You never even yell at us. And you never hit me, even when I deserved it. I would beat the shit out of myself sometimes," he added half-jokingly, trying to loosen the atmosphere a bit.

But when he glanced at Phil, he didn't look amused at all. Rather worried and deeply touched for the wrong reasons.

"Techno, do you know what it means that 'the bar is on the floor'?"

The boy shrugged.

"That you settle for anything?"

"Yhm. Kinda. That you have very low expectations." Phil rested his elbows on his thighs, turning more towards him. "Like when you say the food was good because you didn't poison yourself with it. Or that someone drives well because they didn't crash the car into a tree."

Techno had no idea where this whole definition was going to lead them, but he nodded for the sake of peace.

"Yeah?"

Phil's face tightened.

"Not yelling at you or using violence doesn't make me a good person," he said so firmly that Techno nodded automatically. "Means I'm not a complete asshole, but nothing else. You just

met so many bad people, everyone seems better now."

The boy opened his mouth, then closed it again, not sure how to respond to it.

"That's a bad thing?" He stammered at last, gripping his fingers tighter on the sleeves of his blouse.

This time it was Phil who hesitated.

"Yes."

"Oh." Although the fire was not going to die down yet, he suddenly felt very cold. He swallowed hard. "Are you mad at me?"

Phil's face softened instantly.

"No, of course not," he said, carefully placing his hand over Techno's as if asking for permission. The boy hesitated only a moment before squeezing his fingers in a mute reply. "It's just... When you have low expectations, people often take advantage of it. They see that they don't have to try, and you'll be pleased anyway. I wish you could understand that you deserve more." He looked at him, but whatever he was looking for, he clearly didn't find it, because he sighed heavily. "You don't like bacon, do you?"

Techno wrinkled his nose.

"No. It's greasy."

"But you ate it all when you started living with me."

"Because I didn't know if you'd give me something else." He threw up his arms. "I didn't want to be hungry."

Phil nodded.

"Exactly. See?" He leaned in, keeping his hand just above the ground. "Your bar was here - on the 'I want to survive' level. That is definitely too low."

Techno studied his hand for a moment before raising his eyebrows.

"So I have to be picky?"

"You could say so. You need to know you deserve good things."

The boy nodded slowly, though, to tell the truth, he was very far from sincere consent. It was easy for Phil to tell since he had never done anything wrong. And it was surely just as easy to think that way, looking at Wilbur, irritating and stupid and innocent to the limit. But Techno... Techno was a completely different story.

Who knows, maybe he did deserve good things. But he wasn't at all sure if the 'good things' deserved to be stuck with him.

He had a very strong feeling that he shouldn't say it aloud if he didn't want to hear how wrong he was for the rest of the night.

"I think you're good anyway," he muttered instead, quickly looking away. "With or without a bar. You're good."

Phil released his hand and for a moment Techno could only focus on how cold the air suddenly felt. But then he was pulled to Phil's warm side, and involuntarily winced because, really, he was too old for such things. Though perhaps at times, under certain circumstances, he may consider a minor exception...

"Thank you."

He looked up at the night sky. And then a little lower, at the first person that had shown it to him.

"It's fine."

It wasn't fine.

It couldn't be because when Techno emerged from the tent the next day, still sleepy and a bit stiff, Phil announced immediately that he wanted to talk to them about something. He didn't look angry, rather stressed out, which, in fact, was even worse. The last time he sat in front of them with that face, he had to leave for a few days and leave them with their babysitter. Techno hated every minute of her presence. Not because he missed his dad or anything, absolutely not. He didn't run out of the house just to be able to watch the car drive away until it disappeared around a corner and he didn't lock himself in the room afterwards and didn't cry at all for the rest of the evening, it's all slander, no one has evidence. He just didn't like the constant presence of a stranger in the house. And he didn't like being sent to bed at night when he was having a bad dream, instead of being offered hot chocolate. And that she let Wilbur skip meals and doesn't see at all that the moron was ready to starve himself out of sadness.

Techno was not a baby. He could take care of himself and he could comfort himself, and he could stand over his brother until he finally emptied his plate. But he was the first to throw himself into Phil's arms as soon as he crossed the threshold. He was self-sufficient all his life - he deserved to be helped.

Wilbur, apparently, remembered it just as clearly and dramatically, for as soon as they sat down by the extinguished fire, he blurted out:

"You're leaving again?"

Phil looked a bit offended.

"That was one time two years ago. Is this 'again' really necessary here?"

Techno frowned.

"So you're leaving?" he made sure, mentally already preparing the list of arguments, so that this time they could at least get by without a babysitter. He could be left alone, that was fine, but he absolutely didn't want a stranger in his house to make stupid rules and think she knew anything about them after two minutes of talking.

Phil closed his eyes for a moment.

"I'm not going anywhere," he assured, which, surprisingly, didn't sound particularly reassuring. Perhaps the tone he used. As if he were saying, 'Yes, your hamster survived the meeting with the cat, but soon after it was killed by a vacuum cleaner.' "In fact, quite the opposite. Someone will come to us."

The boys exchanged glances. No one ever had the heart to talk about it aloud, but Phil didn't have many friends, and his contact with his extended family was 'by letter, once a year, if he doesn't forget.' So the list of potential guests wasn't particularly long. The list of guests whose visits would cause such a fuss - was practically non-existent.

"Oookeeeey?" Wilbur finally decided to pace the conversation. "But are you going to tell us more, or should we guess?"

Phil was not at all eager to answer, which was absolutely not reassuring to anyone.

"I had a call recently. From social services," he said, and Techno suddenly felt very hot. "They wanted to know if I could take care of a child for a while." He waited a moment as if the atmosphere wasn't tense enough without a dramatic pause. "A boy."

It grew quiet in the camp. Quite absurdly quiet, as if all nature held its breath for a moment so as not to disturb an important moment. No birds, no cracks, no wind and no rustling of leaves. Complete silence.

The perfect contrast to an inner scream that no one else could hear.

"You've agreed?" Wilbur asked at the exact same moment Techno said:

"You told them to piss off?"

Phil looked from one to the other, and although his expression hadn't changed a bit, Techno felt so damn judged anyway. Mainly by himself.

"I said I would think about it. I would like to ask you for your opinion first."

Techno appreciated the gesture. Really. Completely honestly. It didn't change anything at all, but he appreciated it. Phil could ask as much he wanted in the subtlest possible way, but the proposition itself had a pressure that was hard to ignore.

He glanced at Wilbur, expecting any form of support and unanimity, but his brother seemed surprisingly calm for the circumstances.

"What does 'for a while' mean?"

Phil relaxed a bit as he saw a relief on the horizon that shouldn't have been meant for him.

"He's new in the system. They're looking for a place for him to wait until his legal situation gets a little less complicated."

"Oh." Wilbur frowned. "Means he has parents."

It was by no means a novelty, the vast majority of children in the system had at least one very inept parent and a greater or lesser chance of returning to their family home in an undefined 'sometime'. Mostly 'sometime' was not a longed-for date at all, but rather a source of problems and a missed opportunity for a new, potentially better home, but Techno never thought about it deeply. He himself was perfectly good at ruining his future, he didn't need the help of hazy ghosts from the past. But now he pricked up his ears, feeling a sudden rush of hope, because if his years of being shoved from house to house had taught him anything, it was that the children whose biological parents were still around never stayed anywhere for long.

Phil hesitated for a moment, and it was clear that he was calculating exactly what and how to tell them.

"Yet," he finally admitted. "Mother, as far as I know. Sam had said nothing about any father."

Techno looked down at the still visible traces he had carved in the ground with his shoes yesterday. He felt bloody silly about how confident he had been until a few hours ago. How naively he accepted his present life as something stable and unchanging.

"So they want you to tame him, so then someone normal will want him permanently?" He said, looking up at Phil, who was obviously confused right now.

"I wouldn't put it that way-"

"But it is so."

Phil sighed heavily.

"Yes. I guess you could say that, yes."

"And how long will it take?" He didn't care how rough and cold his tone was: he needed answers, clear and specific.

This time, Phil thought a little longer, which was actually a good sign. Techno didn't like when someone lied to calm him down. Phil, well... he did it practically all the time. But in his defense - most of these things he seemed to believe himself. Like when he assured Techno that he wasn't stupid or horrible or hopeless at all. Or when he said that nothing could stop him from loving him. Very nice, innocent little lies. Techno had a goddamn weakness for them.

"A few months, probably," Phil finally replied, and then he looked at his second child, waving his raised hand in the air for a long moment. "Wilbur, this isn't school. You can talk."

The boy lowered his hand.

"What's his name?" He asked because of course he asked, because he was himself, absolutely unable to sense that very serious negotiations were taking place right next to him. Techno was eager to kick him for it.

Phil, on the other hand, smiled broadly.

"Tommy," he said, and oh, Techno didn't like that tone a lot, that note of affection, as if by some miracle he had already attached himself to the baby before he saw it in front of his eyes. It couldn't be worse. "He's six."

Ah. So it was worse. Six years - the worst possible age. Big enough to turn everyone's life into hell, but too small to discreetly punch him.

Wilbur beamed as if he had taken over the remnants of his brother's joy and will to live.

"A baby!" he was glad, because apparently he has never seen a toddler rolling on the floor of a supermarket. "Almost an infant!"

Phil laughed and shook his head, clearly happy to be able to count on a minimum of cooperation on at least one side.

"Wilbur, you weren't much older when you came to me."

"Yes, but I was already well trained so it doesn't count."

Phil immediately stopped smiling.

"Wil, I asked you..." He sighed heavily, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"It was funny! And you smiled, I saw!"

"It was a grimace of pain," he muttered, straightening up. He looked first at one boy, then at the other, and his face turned serious. "Listen, both of you." He moved to the very edge of the stump, leaning towards them, and they both copied the gesture immediately and without any thought. "I won't do anything you don't agree to. We're family, and this is a family decision, so please be honest about your thoughts."

'Family decision'. When Techno first heard this term, his utterly automatic response was 'So why am I here too?' Phil wasn't thrilled with it. He made that face of his when he looked like he was about to cry, and you could almost hear a very sad violin in the background.

"You're part of the family, Techno," he assured, brushing the boy's hair back behind his ears, perhaps more to have an excuse to pull him a little closer.

And okay, Techno knew that. In theory. Of course he was formally part of the family, he had even been given the same last name and new papers, and Phil was stuck with him more than ever. But he was still a child. And that was more than enough to make his opinion worth shit. He knew it was worth shit. He'd heard it every day for a good few years.

But Phil didn't think that way. Of course Phil didn't think that way, he always had to defy and stand out.

"I want to know what you think," he pleaded, then really listened and heeded his opinion.

"No. Absolutely not," he would say and then patiently explain why, as if he had never heard of the golden rule 'Because I said so'.

"Ah. Yes, I guess you're right," he admitted, and even for the hundredth time, Techno was still as surprised as the first time.

Of course he could have said 'no' earlier too. And then scream, kick, and scratch when his protest was completely ignored. When he watched more strands of his hair land on the floor. When in the middle of the day he suddenly felt like sleeping. When he smelled cigarettes in the room and wanted to run away, wanted to hide, but his legs felt like cotton wool and he knew that sooner or later they would find him anyway.

When they said he could stay and then-

Phil liked it when they had their own opinion. He liked to listen to them and correct them if they were wrong, and he didn't get angry if they made mistakes. Like when Techno said something very stupid about Sapnap's parents, which he was then really ashamed of and apologized for, even though it wasn't his fault that he had heard exactly such things most of his life.

Phil was... special. When he said 'family decision' he really meant it, and he really did give each of them a veto equal to his own.

But he was also very, very poor at hiding that he cares about something. He might have thought he would fool anyone if he kept his expression indifferent, but there was sincere hope in his eyes, and his shoulders relaxed significantly as Wilbur nodded after a moment's thought.

"It'll be fun," he said completely carelessly. Techno didn't expect anything else from him, but was disappointed anyway. "We'll feed him and take him for walks and I'll teach him some cool tricks..."

Phil raised an eyebrow.

"He's not a dog, Wilbur."

"No, but you don't want to buy me a puppy, so I have to work with what I have."

Though Techno was very much in favor of buying a leash and a muzzle, he could understand why Phil had eloquently ignored the idea.

"Techno?"

He looked down at his shoes again.

"You want to take him," he said more than asked, and maybe in his heart, very, very deeply, he was hoping Phil would lie. That he would give him any starting point and a way to get around his remorse.

"I want to help," he heard instead, and he clenched his fists tighter. "But I won't be angry if you say no. You have every right to disagree."

Techno knew he had. And, in fact, he was planning to make use of it at first. He didn't want any strange child, he didn't want it to hang around the house, to move his stuff, to even get close to Phil and try to trick him by doing... absolutely anything, Phil could be tricked by anything, no barriers, no thought.

He wanted to do this. He wanted to refuse. But he hesitated a second too long, and that was enough to make him feel bad about his own resistance.

Phil was the best the system had ever offered him, the only good thing that had happened to him, the only parent who actually deserved to be called that way. And Techno had just assured him about it! He himself called him kind and caring and tender and painfully understanding, and he might not have said most of these things out loud, but that was what he meant.

He might not understand why Phil was so concerned about whether his expectations of life and people were low or high. But he was well aware that if he was really going to raise the bar, it would be good if he could reach it himself afterwards. And denying another child a good home, even if only for a while, when he knew perfectly well that a second chance practically never happened - wasn't supposed to make it easier for him.

A few months didn't sound so bad. Like a nightmare, to be precise, but with a vision of an imminent end. Phil will be happy to help. Wilbur will take care of torturing someone else for a while. And he himself will have a slightly cleaner conscience and maybe he will feel slightly better with himself.

Couple months. Not forever. Just for a moment. He won't even know how it's going to be over.

Techno could hear his heart pounding, the blood rushing in his ears, his breath suddenly seeming deafening.

Not forever.

Phil wasn't like that. He kept his promises. He asked him for his opinion. He wouldn't ask if he wanted to cheat him, he wouldn't ask if he tried to replace him, he wouldn't ask if he was fed up with him, and he would look for an excuse if he could find someone better, someone 'real'.

Not forever. Not forever. Not forever, not forever, not forever, not forever, he will stay here, this is his house, his family, *he was here first...* !

He swallowed, suddenly realizing that his fingers on his thigh were a little too tight to still feel. It took a lot more effort to loosen the hand than it should have been.

"Just for a while?" He said, in a strangely harsh, uneasy voice.

Phil watched him closely, so he cleared his throat, trying to pull himself together. He didn't want to talk about it. Never, but especially not now.

"Couple months."

Techno took a deep breath.

"Okay. Let it be. But if he touches my stuff-"

Wilbur snorted loudly.

"Who wants your books? He's *six*, not that nerdy yet," he sneered and then squeaked as he landed with his back on the ground. "Ah! Dad, tell him to stop...!"

Phil just laughed and for a moment, one brief moment, everything was just as it should be. Only the three of them, their little family, a little crookedly glued together. They needed no one else, now or ever.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Ladies, gentlemen, everyone in between and none of the above - Tommy is finally here!
(And Techno isn't happy about it.)

Techno was angry.

Which would be the norm on any other day of the week, but not on a Friday afternoon. He might not like Tuesdays when lessons seemed to drag on forever, or Thursdays because Thursday was just an unnecessary extension of Wednesday, but it took a real tragedy to ruin Friday. Even if he got the worst grades all day, argued with everyone he knew, and finally got sucked into a tornado, the thought of the weekend ahead always kept him in a good mood.

Always. But not this time. Not when he was stuck in the living room with Phil tracing a path around the couch and Wilbur tapping a beat on a guitar drum. Nobody had said a word for a good few minutes, the atmosphere was starting to get tense, and Techno slowly felt the urge to slap his brother on the hands and silence his nervous tic as well. Instead, he merely nudged his knee with his foot.

"Stop."

Wilbur, of course, maliciously began drumming his fingers even louder, using both hands now. Phil looked at him with obvious desperation, then shifted his gaze to the older boy.

"I'm not asking you to smile, but could you maybe lighten up a little?"

Teasing him was never an easy task, especially when he looked so bloody stressed out, but Techno managed to reach for his deepest self-denial to frown even more.

"That's my normal face," he grunted, pressing his back harder against the back of the couch.

He had no intention of making it easy for anyone. If it was up to him, they would be spending a perfectly normal afternoon making popcorn and arguing about who should pick the movie and why not Wilbur, but since no one has bothered to ask him for his opinion...

Well, theoretically Phil asked him for his opinion. And Techno theoretically agreed. Theoretically he had a whole week to get used to the thought, and theoretically he had a million offers to talk about it that he rejected of sheer stubbornness, and theoretically he knew that he was acting childish and stupid now. Theoretically. In practice, he pulled his hood up to his forehead and pretended not to hear a heavy sigh just above his head.

He knew, he got that information, and yet somehow he was still surprised that some little parasite would really force its way into their lives and into their home.

Well, with this force, maybe not entirely true... But Techno was certainly ready to use it to get rid of the intruder. Therefore, he ignored all Phil's efforts and Wilbur's teasing, pretending that he didn't care at all what first impression he made and why it was wrong.

But when the car actually appeared in the driveway, and after a minute two muffled voices could be heard in front of the house, Techno immediately followed Phil into the entryway. He was offended, but not stupid - one had to know the enemy in order to better sense their weaknesses. He leaned out from behind the sitting room door frame, Wilbur practically on his back, tense as he waited for the inevitable. Which took a long time to arrive. Suspiciously too much. Phil must have come to a similar conclusion, because after a few more seconds, with his hand on the doorknob, he gave up waiting for the bell to ring and flung the door wide open.

Techno's first impression about Tommy was surprisingly good. Mainly because the boy was nowhere in sight. Exactly as it should stay.

On the threshold of their house, with one foot on the doormat and hands on his hips, stood a tall man in a green T-shirt and dark glasses.

"Tommy, I swear, if you don't come here right now..." He paused for a long time, glaring at the garden, but a second later realized he was no longer alone and immediately abandoned his threatening pose. "Oh. Sorry, I just... Phil, right?" He held out his hand in greeting. "Sam. I brought you a..." he glanced sideways and sighed heavily. "Biological weapon."

Phil stared at him, clearly surprised, but shook his hand without hesitation. Perfectly in time to save Sam from landing on the ground, when a rushing child suddenly charged him with all its weight.

"Tommy!"

The boy didn't care about the sharp tone or the fact that he was grabbed by the shoulders and held in place. His feet were still moving in the sand, and his gaze scanned the surroundings before finally resting on Phil.

"That's yours?" He asked, holding up his hand tightly gripped on a long stick.

Sam sighed a second time.

"Tommy, what did I ask for?"

He got completely ignored for the second time.

"I found it in the bushes, right over there!" The kid broke free from the embrace to run away and show exactly which place it is about. "Can I take it? Can I?"

Phil looked at him, at the stick, at the boy again, and beamed.

"Of course you can," he assured, crouching down to catch up with the child. By height. Though Techno maliciously suspected that intellectually as well. "You must be Tommy, right?"

The boy showed little interest, too busy swinging the stick around and trying to knock him out.

"Yup!" He only nodded when Sam slapped him lightly on the shoulder. Techno genuinely admired man's composure. In his place, he would have murdered the brat five times. Though he wouldn't need any excuse for that, so maybe he just wasn't objective.

Aside from all his absolutely justified reluctance, Tommy looked... surprisingly normal. He had disheveled blond hair that certainly hadn't seen a comb very often, a round, typically childlike face, and spindly limbs adorned with patches in several places. His clothes needed to be washed well, and his red backpack stuck together thanks to duct tape, but Techno had seen kids in much worse shape and with much worse luggage. At least they didn't make him pack in a garbage bag. You have to enjoy the little things.

Sam, by contrast, looked like he'd just stopped enjoying being alive.

"Tommy, focus," he asked in a very tired voice, and when there was no answer, he grabbed the tip of the stick that drifted dangerously close to his face and held it in place.

The boy wasn't delighted with this. He jerked with all his might, once, twice, on the third time he gave a piercing squeak and hung on the stick with his whole body.

"Saaam...!" He moaned aloud, shuffling his feet on the pavement. "Saaam, you're mean!" He tilted his head back, his hair almost touching the ground, and this time he stared at Phil. "Tell him to stop!" He demanded. "It's your stick, tell him to give it back to me!"

Sam looked apologetic, but Phil just laughed and waved him off.

"Let him have fun," he said, and Tommy immediately chimed in with an impatient, 'Did you hear? Did you?' "I'm glad he's in a good mood."

Sam certainly couldn't say the same about himself, but he pulled the boy to a relatively upright position and let him and the stick slip to a safe distance. He also ignored the tongue pointed out at him. Techno never thought that after everything he had experienced while in the system, he would ever feel such a surge of sympathy for any of its employees, but apparently there's a first time for everything.

"I'm sorry for this." Sam looked at Phil as if he was really afraid that he would change his mind and tell him to take the child back where he came from. Or as if his conscience even dictated to propose such an option. "Today he's very," he searched for the right word for a moment, "himself."

Techno was genuinely grateful that of all the social workers, they missed Nate this time. And not only because he didn't like the guy. Sam simply didn't know Phil yet, and he had no idea how easy it was to manipulate him into anything, especially into a love for a child, preferably

completely unfounded and at first sight. There was a chance he wouldn't try to drop them off with a few more brothers and maybe a sister to match. Not yet. Though that could change very easily, since Phil was still crouched on the threshold, watching Tommy swing his stick in the air and smiling as if the kid was receiving a Nobel Prize.

"I'm not going to complain, believe me," he assured, then turned to the boy, and Techno could have sworn his voice got higher. "Hey, Tommy." He held out his hand, and the boy gripped it confidently without even a second's thought. Then he turned it carefully to all sides, and winced, clearly disappointed that it was empty. "I'm Phil. And these two crouching gremlins," he jerked a thumb behind him, toward the door, "are my sons."

Techno took a step back in a quick tactical retreat, but only crashed into Wilbur and both of them struggled to keep their balance, holding onto the wall and ultimately leaning even further into the corridor. Tommy squinted at them, and immediately lost some courage when he realized he was in the minority. He lowered his hand to rest the tip of the stick on the ground and stepped back, hiding behind Sam.

"Hey..." he waved at them, a little hesitantly, but shyness was clearly not in his nature, because after a while he started to lean out from behind his guardian and stand on his toes to peer down the corridor.

Techno began to seriously regret the moment of weakness and the desire to be a good person. He tried, didn't like it, could he still change his mind? What about the thirty day trial period?

Meanwhile, Phil's face went from the one people make when they look at babies to the one they make when they see little kittens.

"Why don't we go inside and you can say hi, how about that?" He straightened up and held out his hand to the boy with obvious hope, but seemed bloody surprised anyway when Tommy actually reached for it, moving in close and clutching Phil's shirt in his other hand. He was kicking his legs again and jiggling in place, but whenever he crossed his gaze with Techno, he immediately closed his eyes and hid his face behind Phil's forearm. Apparently, he never grew out of the 'If I can't see them, they can't see me' phase.

Anyway, he forgot about any resistance as soon as he entered the house. Sam had to prod him on the shoulder so that he would stop literally looking in every corner and graciously took off his shoes, but even sending his sneakers against the wall with two kicks, the boy kept staring in all directions as if he had never seen so many shoes and jackets at once in his life. Maybe he really didn't. This is exactly what Techno didn't plan to make fun of.

But that was all of his 'free pass', because as soon as they entered the living room, Tommy inhaled loudly and, abandoning his precious stick, ran to the couch, climbing on the backrest and rolling over it to the center of the cushion.

"Should I sign anything else?" Phil was completely oblivious to the fact that his new mentee clearly couldn't use the furniture properly.

Sam also seemed much calmer. He probably assumed that a child once moved over the threshold counts as unpackaged goods and is non-returnable.

"Delivery receipt," he joked, then cleared his throat and grew serious. "But yes, there'll be some more stuff. Can we... move on with this somewhere else?"

Techno had a bloody naive hope that Phil would refuse, but he wasn't at all surprised when he immediately showed the guest the way to the kitchen.

Phil glanced once more at the couch, where Tommy was trying to figure out which remote was for what, and then at his sons, still crouching by the door.

"I'll be right back, okay? Sit down for a while."

The boys looked at the couch in unison, exchanged glances, and at the same time started running towards the armchair. Wilbur was first, but that didn't stop Techno from pushing him to the floor and taking his place.

Phil shook his head, turning to Sam and gesturing for him to follow.

"I would say that normally they know how to behave, but they are actually exceptionally calm today."

He closed the door behind them, and the living room suddenly felt way too quiet. Wilbur perched on the floor with his back against his brother's legs, but there was no indication that he planned to be any less useless than usual and help in any way. So Techno continued silently staring at Tommy. And Tommy was staring at him. And he was smiling. Like some psychopath.

Eventually, he found the right remote and turned on the TV, but inadvertently muted it, so despite his crooked expressions and a low rumble, the characters on the screen remained silent. Techno decided to pretend that he had somehow mastered lip-reading in the last ten seconds. Wilbur, on the other hand, reached for his guitar, which had been resting on the table so far, and placed it on his lap, rubbing the strings lazily, as if with an accidental gesture.

Tommy twitched, and his head immediately turned to the source of the sound. Not with fear, but with pure childish curiosity. He was in a completely strange place, with people he didn't know, but there was no hesitation in him, nor any resistance whatsoever. Techno was starting to fucking hate it.

His brother, on the other hand, seemed happy in the same hopeful way he had been a few years earlier when he had asked if Techno could play cards.

"I'm Wilbur, by the way," he said, lifting his hand from the strings for a moment to salute. "And the grumpy one is Techno. Don't worry, he doesn't bite."

He may not bite, but he kicked. And he gave proof of it, which made Wilbur almost hit his nose on the carpet.

Tommy, absolutely unfazed, straightened proudly, hauling his legs up onto the mattress.

"And you can call me Big T!" He announced with a very serious face.

Wilbur blinked.

"No, I definitely won't."

The child didn't seem particularly offended by the refusal. For his own good, because no one would particularly care about it. Instead, he was staring at the guitar with great attention, his mouth opening a little wider each time a sound came out of it. Wilbur stroked the strings lazily, until he finally looked up at the boy and his eyebrows went up as if he had just noticed him now.

"Can you play something?" He asked and the kid beamed.

"Tubbo taught me to play the piano. Just a little. But I can play "Baa Baa Black Sheep"!"

Wilbur moved a little closer to the couch, placing the guitar in his arms a little more correctly.

"Wow, yeah, that's something." He nodded appreciatively, and his fingers touched the strings again, once, twice, before they began to move them in a much less chaotic way. Tommy frowned as he followed their movements, then inhaled loudly and brightened at the sound of a familiar song. He crawled across the mattress on all fours, leaning over to see better, and Techno suddenly felt very cornered. And damn betrayed.

Wilbur repeated the chorus a good three times before putting the guitar back into his lap.

"Who's Tubbo?" He asked, resting his elbow on the drum and folding his chin in his hand.

Tommy jumped up, clearly excited that someone was paying him so much attention. And maybe a little bit on the subject, too, because he was smiling broadly, spitting words out much faster than before.

"Tubbo is my best friend! He's cool and he's funny and smart and he likes bees! And he lives nearby, so we can meet up every day." Suddenly he hesitated and grimaced. "Unless my mom takes the key from me, then we can't."

Techno straightened up a bit, interested for the first time. Wilbur glanced at him anxiously, as if seeking support, but when he only got a brief shrug, he decided to act alone.

"Why was she taking the key?"

Tommy rolled over onto his stomach, legs swinging in the air, apparently not really able to hold still for more than two seconds.

"I don't know," he said suspiciously carelessly. "But I didn't like her doing that because I couldn't leave and sometimes she was gone awfully long. But that's okay, because I could drop the basket out the window and Tubbo would put things in it for me. We also tried to put Tubbo in the basket, but it was too heavy."

Wilbur nodded slowly.

"I see," he said, and he was clearly getting ready to ask something else, most likely about how many floors, theoretically, a basket with a small passenger was supposed to go up, but at the same moment the kitchen door opened and all three turned their heads.

"Sam!" Tommy rested his hands on the backrest and started jumping up and down. "Sam, Wilbur can play guitar!"

The man looked at him, then at the older boy, and his face softened for a moment.

"That's great. Maybe he'll teach you someday." He hesitated, but then reached out to ruffle the baby's hair, leaning over him. "I'll be getting on. I leave you in good hands."

The boy's face instantly lengthened and his eyes widened.

"But why?" He asked in a loud groaning voice. "Saaam, you can't go away!"

He leaned over the backrest, grabbing his guardian tightly by the neck and clutching his T-shirt with his fingers.

"Tommy..."

"No! You said you wouldn't go!"

The man sighed heavily and straightened up, letting the boy hang on him like a very original and very mobile jewelry.

"I did. When I was waiting for you at the station for you to come back from the bathroom." He winced as the child, swinging his legs in all directions, hit his stomach with a knee. "I can't stay forever, Tommy."

Childlike despair, though undoubtedly sincere and damned strong, had to give way to the laws of physics - the T-shirt slipped out from under the boy's fingers and he slammed to the floor with a very unhappy face. And the need to share this misfortune with the whole world.

"But I want you to stay!" He shouted, trying to grab Sam by the leg, but Sam managed to step back beyond his reach in time. The child tried again, but when his fingers tightened in the air again, he winced, his chin trembled and his eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Saaam...!"

He made a long screech that could crack the glass in the windows, and he sniffed very dramatically, rubbing the back of his hand at his eyes. Techno wanted to howl himself. As if he needed another manipulator at home and an unfulfilled actor, for God sake...

But whatever it was, the method certainly worked for Phil, who seemed torn between wanting to rescue the kid and the already learned distance and uncertainty as to whether it would only make things worse.

"Can I help somehow?" He asked, but Sam just shrugged.

"I have no idea. I met him literally two days ago," he replied, which sounded disturbing for many reasons, considering how used to similar scenes he seemed. Either he was a heartless

cold machine, or Tommy had a penchant for expressing emotions as loudly as possible. "He's just a terrible clingy. If you take him for a walk, keep his head down. Once he makes eye contact, it's over. Tommy!" He turned to the boy, shouting over his wailing yell. He didn't come any closer, but he leaned over, resting his hands on knees, and that was enough for the boy to lift his face, wet and red. "I know you want me to stay. I would like to, too, but I can't. But I will miss you, you know? And I'm sure all of your friend's at the group house will, too."

Tommy was so surprised he stopped crying for a moment.

"I had friends there?"

Techno didn't have to see Phil's expression to feel the almost material wave of compassion fill the room. And although he would never admit it, he also forgot for a second that Tommy was an intruder who doesn't deserve any sympathy.

Sam must have misinterpreted the sudden change of mood and felt accused in some way, for he winced and his eyes sharpened.

"Of course you did," he replied in a tone that strongly implied that Tommy did have friends, and if he didn't quit right away, they would cry a lot at his funeral. And it's better for him to stick to this version more than life as such. "Everyone liked you very much there."

Tommy didn't seem to understand the message.

"But they took my things."

"I'm sure it wasn't on purpose."

"But I was standing next to them and yelling that it's mine!"

"Oh, I know you yelled, that's for sure," he muttered, a little too loudly. Then he looked at the boy and placed his hand on his head, then pulled away from him, slightly but firmly, as if he wanted to break this bond as quickly as possible, with one precise cut. Which failed, apparently, because before he withdrew his hand, he ran his fingers through his fair hair once more in an almost tender gesture. "Tommy. Everything's gonna be okay, right?"

The child made a vague, tearful gibberish.

Wilbur suddenly put down his guitar and got up to come a little closer.

"Hey, Tommy." He slipped his hands into his pockets and swayed on his heels, trying to pretend to be indifferent. "You were supposed to tell me more about Tubbo. I am still waiting."

Tommy whimpered again, softly and without conviction.

"And you want to hear it?" He asked, wiping his cheeks with his sleeve.

Wilbur shrugged.

"Sure. Why not. By the way, can you play cards?"

Techno rolled his eyes so hard he almost managed to see the inside of the skull.

"Toady," he muttered, and Wilbur immediately turned to poke foot on his shoulder. Unfortunately for him he was too far away to be a stable move, so as soon as Techno grabbed his ankle and pulled, he immediately staggered and lost his balance. At the last moment, he clung to his shoulder and they both landed on the floor in an extremely painful combination of limbs.

Phil closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Boys..." he began in the tone he used when he tried to pretend to be strict for a moment, but he didn't have time to reprimand because Tommy suddenly took a very loud and very dramatic breath.

"His hair's pink," he whispered.

Techno instinctively raised his hand, realizing that the hood had come off his head. Great. That's what he needed right now, silly comments about his hairstyle. He tensed in anticipation, but Tommy didn't seem to be making fun of anyone at all.

"It's pink," he repeated, his eyes flashing with excitement. "He dyed his hair! Can I too? I want to!"

Phil, who seemed to be expecting something else as well, relaxed his shoulders and laughed.

"Maybe later," he replied, just as Sam said 'Absolutely not'. They exchanged glances and Sam immediately capitulated. Very rightly so. Phil might not look scary, but he didn't like it when someone questioned his parenting methods. He was then surprisingly stubborn and contradictory.

Eventually, Sam withdrew stealthily a few minutes later while Tommy was busy telling the tiniest detail why Tubbo was absolutely the best thing to happen to mankind since Jesus himself. Phil didn't seem convinced of the method, but no one needed another show of rolling on the floor, so in the end he discreetly escorted the guest to the door and with one meaningful glance imposed a collective silence on everyone in the household.

"Would you like to see the house, Tommy?" He asked, and the child immediately broke off mid-sentence, thought for a moment, and finally jumped off the couch, walking up to him with a lively step, grabbing his hand without asking and continuing the story as if nothing had happened. Phil looked down at their clasped hands as if he had never seen anything like it before, but the look of wonder was quickly replaced by affection.

Techno knew perfectly well that he's a fool for taking it personally. More specifically, he was fully aware of the astronomical flips he was doing to take this innocent gesture as a hint. Not everything had to be about him, and certainly not the fact that Phil's new protégé apparently had absolutely no qualms about physical contact, and not only was he not afraid of strangers but clung to them like a moth to a lamp.

But knowing didn't mean that negative feelings would magically disappear, even, and perhaps especially, the stupid and nonsensical ones. Because he still remembered behaving himself a few years ago, in exactly the same situation. He remembered how scared and angry he was, and how much he'd rather be absolutely anywhere but here, with these people. He remembered how much effort he had put into deliberately making Phil's life difficult and annoying him, leading him to the brink to finally be able to say with satisfaction that he was right from the beginning and nothing could be as good as it seems. And he remembered how long, how many months had passed before he allowed himself to be so close, before allowing Phil to do so.

The fact that Tommy had somehow skipped this stage, without even a little effort or thought, drove him crazy for many different reasons. Mostly because he was ashamed of that anger.

"You can take whatever you want," Phil said as soon as they entered the kitchen, Techno shuffling at the far end, closing their strange procession. It turned out to be completely unnecessary, because Tommy immediately started opening all the cupboards and drawers he could reach, and his eyes grew bigger with each successive one.

"Sam didn't say you're rich!" He exclaimed anxiously as he opened the refrigerator. He looked at Phil as if waiting for some confirmation, but quickly lost his patience with it and started jumping up and down to see what was on the top shelf. "You have food here! The real one!" He pushed the bottom container aside, savoring the view for a moment in a very rare silence, before reaching into it. "Can I take this?"

Phil looked at him, at the peppers in his hand, and back at the boy, and his face showed many very contradictory emotions.

"Sure. Go ahead," he encouraged, because there was never shortage of food in his house. "But are you sure you like peppers?"

Tommy shrugged.

"I don't know, I've never eaten one. Is it good?"

"A little spicy."

"That's fine! I'm a big man, I can eat spicy things." He pushed his chest out proudly, but then his eyes fell on the window and he forgot what they were talking about. "You have a garden?!"

Wilbur barely jumped out of his way as he rushed to the patio door, leaving the refrigerator open and clutching the peppers to his chest like a precious treasure. He struggled for a moment with the door handle before he finally fell onto the sun-heated boards and, with a cry of delight, headed straight into the grass, still without shoes and in white socks. The other three watched him go, leaning out the door.

"If it make you feel better," Wilbur said finally, just as Tommy circled the tree, tried to jump to the lowest branch and landed with his back on the ground, "I didn't eat very healthy either, before you took me in."

Phil looked at him as if he had just been asked if he planned to keep the knife stuck in his heart.

"How would that make me feel better?" He asked, but Wilbur just shrugged.

For the next several minutes they watched in silence as Tommy looked at literally every bush he came across from every possible angle, kicking stones and digging up carrot beds, to be amazed to discover that there was a vegetable hidden under the heaps of dirt. Every now and then he would find something really interesting, like a stone, a stick, another stone, an old Coke can, or more stones.

"Can I take it? Can I?" He asked, gasping more and more, bringing them more loot. And Phil, of course, agreed immediately, so the mound of rubbish on the terrace grew at an alarming rate.

"Tommy, why don't you come in and check out the rest of the house?" He finally asked, handing the boy a glass of water, the contents of which disappeared in less than a second. "I promise you'll be able to go outside tonight."

The boy wrinkled his nose, looked back, clearly reluctant to abandon his treasure mine, but finally let himself be convinced and returned inside, hot, happy and wearing socks that were definitely no longer white. And still holding peppers in his hand, because of reasons.

"I like it here," he said, stuffing the last pebbles into his pockets and grabbing Phil's hand again, this time without any invitation. If Techno had ever liked him, he would have stopped at this point. "But where do you sleep?"

"The bedrooms are upstairs," Wilbur said, wiping traces of mud off the floor with his own socks. Probably so that they could leave matching footprints and that everyone could say how cute and similar they were.

Techno wasn't jealous at all. He just wanted to slap his brother just like that, as a reminder.

Tommy opened his mouth and his eyes lit up.

"You have more rooms here?" He looked from Wilbur to Phil and back again. "Can I get one? Please, can one be mine?"

Phil looked at the child in a way that made it clear that if he had no spare room he would immediately start collecting bricks for the extension and mixing the cement with his bare hands.

"Of course you can," he assured, limiting himself to squeezing the boy's hand a little tighter for now. "It's prepared especially for you."

Like a place in hell, Techno thought, and he wasn't damn dramatic about it, and his anger wasn't pathetic at all, and he had a lot of reasons not to put up with the little gremlin at this point. Obviously.

Still, he followed the rest of the way upstairs, mostly to keep an eye on his new enemy in case something stupid crossed his mind. And he was right, because as soon as Tommy ran up the stairs, he immediately swiveled around, looking carefully, ran twice down the corridor, waiting for the others, and finally, without question, stopped at the next door and reached for the doorknob.

Phil put his hand over her at the last moment.

"That's Techno's room," he explained as the child looked at him in genuine amazement. "You can't go into someone's room without permission, okay?"

The boy frowned, pulling his hand back a bit too quickly.

"Why?" He asked, and for the first time there was a sense of anxiety in his voice. "I haven't done anything bad yet. Nothing at all!"

Phil hesitated, and Techno was sure that if he concentrated, he could hear the train of his thoughts, passing through every possible station one by one. Somehow he was proud of how much he and Wilbur had alerted him to every little suggestion and kept him mildly paranoid for years. They trained him to be the perfect foster parent. Much less calm man, but a good parent.

If Tommy noticed anything, he didn't show it. He straightened as Phil crouched down in front of him, but didn't back away, trying to make a rebel face.

"Of course not. You're very good," he assured, which had a very loose connection with the truth. "And extremely brave," he added, and Techno would roll his eyes, but it bothered him a little too much complaining about that when he still remembered the pressure in his heart when Phil praised him for the first time. "We just all feel more comfortable here when no one surprises anyone, you know? If you want to enter a room you have to knock first and wait for permission."

Tommy looked unconvinced, but after a long moment of rocking on his heels and intense contemplation, he finally broke down and knocked on the door. Once. And immediately he withdrew his hand quickly, as if a little good manners might bite it off him.

"Can I-"

"No," Techno blurted out without a second's thought.

The child immediately looked to Phil, but he just smiled apologetically.

"No means no."

Tommy puffed up his cheeks.

"But it's not nice!" He huffed, crossing his arms over his chest, and his leg twitched slightly, as if at the last moment he had stopped himself from stomping it. "I didn't do anything to him, and he's mean to me!"

Phil frowned.

"It's also not nice to be rude when someone is protecting his privacy," he instructed in a slightly stricter tone. "Techno has the right to refuse you, and that doesn't mean he's mean or that he doesn't like you."

Techno was mean, indeed, and he definitely didn't like the little gremlin. But he felt a little more confident that he still had Phil on his side. Still. Probably not for long. All the more necessary to celebrate minor victories and a temporary advantage. Especially since Tommy must have actually taken the rebuke personally, for he hung his head and blushed slightly as he scuffed his socks across the floor.

"Okay..." he muttered softly, glancing at Techno and immediately looking away as their gazes met.

"Awww!" Wilbur, being irritating himself, had to ruin it immediately. "He's cute!"

The child's head jerked up, and the effect faded as quickly as it had appeared.

"I'm not cute! I'm a big man!" He said indignantly, standing on his tiptoes, as straight as a string. Which actually made a big difference, mostly because he had absolutely horrible body posture. The first light thrust and all his balance would have gone to hell. Not that Techno actually planned to check it, he would never...

Wilbur apparently decided to see how far he had to go before he made the baby cry.

"Aww, look at him, so adorable."

"Shut up!"

"And he thinks he's dangerous!" He leaned in to squeeze the boy's cheeks. "Cute!"

"I'll bite you!"

Wilbur only laughed as the teeth snapped inches from his hand, but Techno took a step back just in case. You never know what a kid has been putting in his mouth lately and how many germs he's carrying. And he probably wasn't even vaccinated. But at least Techno's room remained independent. Which was bloody hard to be happy about when a few minutes later Tommy was excited about the hot water in the bathroom tap.

"What's that?" The boy finally left the sink alone, leaning in to look at the washing machine drum instead.

Phil blinked at him silently. Techno was almost able to hear his inner scream. And, once again, he was able to understand it. Not liking the gremlin was one thing, but some things were just sad and you couldn't make fun of them.

"Washing machine." Phil finally pulled himself together and crouched down next to the kid. "For washing clothes. Here." He opened the door and the boy immediately stuck his head

inside. If he tried hard, he would most likely fit all of it, which was a damn tempting option. "You put the dirty ones in, turn it on and take out the clean ones."

Tommy stepped back to look at him in surprise.

"But where does the dirt go?"

Phil opened his mouth, but hesitated, then just frowned as he thought hard about something.

"Honestly, I never thought about it..." he finally confessed.

Techno exchanged knowing looks with Wilbur. Phil... had his moments.

Tommy, apparently, too, because all he needed was a significant grunt to remind himself that he should knock before entering Wilbur's room.

"You have a fish!" He rejoiced when he finished looking at every corner, and immediately rushed to the aquarium to tap his finger on the glass.

"Hey, don't do that. This irritates him." Wilbur chided him, pulling his hand away from the glass. For a moment, while he made sure that Milo wouldn't suffer permanent damage to his delicate fish psyche, he was himself again and Techno almost breathed a sigh of relief. Almost. Because right after that, his brother had to spoil everything, glancing at the child and succumbing to... whatever psychological manipulation Tommy was using. "Here, I haven't fed him for the night yet." He handed the boy a container of food, and seeing that he couldn't reach the flap at the top of the aquarium, he grabbed him by the waist and lifted him. "Just a little, yes, that's enough."

Tommy beamed as he put both hands against the glass as Milo fished out his food.

"What's his name?" He asked as Wilbur set him down and grimaced at the sight of fingerprints on the glass. Techno took it as good old Karma.

"Milo the Second."

"And where's Milo the First?"

Wilbur's face tightened.

"We're not talking about Milo the First."

Tommy made the first wise decision of the day, and made no attempt to ask. But he looked back at the aquarium a couple of times and even waved before he stepped out into the corridor again.

"This is my office." Phil gestured first to one door, then to the other. "And this is my bedroom. If you need anything, feel free to come. At any time."

The child raised an eyebrow.

"And if you're gone?"

"Then I'll probably be downstairs."

"And if you aren't here at all?"

Phil looked at him more intently, perhaps finally realizing that the question might have a bit more sense than he initially assumed.

"Then look for Wilbur or Techno. But I'm mostly at home."

Tommy didn't seem convinced at all. But he also didn't have the patience to indulge in emotional distress for too long, not when his legs were carrying him by themselves, and he found at least five new things worth attention every second. Like the lines of laminate flooring that he tried very hard not to step on. Or the fact that the wallpaper in the hallway is stuck upside down in one place.

This time, he didn't need a reminder, and he knocked on the last door of his own accord. Phil laughed and shook his head.

"This one is yours."

The boy's eyes widened and his lips stretched into a broad smile.

"Oh. Okay!" He knocked again, a little louder this time. "I can come in!"

Techno remembered the first time he saw his new room. He remembered the relief of seeing the bed, because sometimes he still felt in his bones every night he spent on the floor, he remembered the thought that if he tried hard he could hide in the cupboard by the desk, he remembered that he hadn't even noticed empty shelves, too busy calculating whether he would be able to pop out the window if he really needed it. And he remembered the disappointment when he realized there was no lock on the door.

Tommy paid no attention to any of these things, and Techno felt a little bad about envying him for it. The absolute carelessness with which he threw his backpack on the bed and ran to the desk, putting his precious vegetable on the table and sliding all the drawers out one by one.

"Somebody's stuff is in there," he said, shuffling through a box of crayons. "Can I take them? Can they be mine?"

Phil grinned.

"Of course. I bought them just for you," he assured me, and the child's hands stopped for a second.

"And that too?" He made sure, picking up a few felt-tip pens.

"Yhm."

"And this?" He picked up the colored notebook with his other hand. Techno tried very hard to ignore the clear glimmer of hope in his eyes and the growing excitement as each new item was officially approved as his property.

There was something damn familiar about it: not in the unifying way when you create a thread of understanding, but in the painful way when someone suddenly reminds you of something very unpleasant. Because Tommy was so damn obvious about the fact that he never had anything - neither nice nor essential, nor just his own. And Techno didn't like to remember that he had been in the same situation until recently. He didn't like to remember that his life was contained in one humiliatingly light suitcase, that he became attached to the first thing he got, with the desperation he was ashamed of, that he called his room 'temporary' for the first few weeks so as not to be disappointed later, when he'll be sent back. He didn't like to remember anything from before he found his family. And although he would never admit it, he sometimes liked to think that it was all just one long, terrible dream that Phil had finally awakened him from.

Now Phil was ready to run in the middle of the night to save another child, and even though Techno knew it was stupid and selfish, he couldn't help worrying that he had just ceased to be special to the only person who had ever seen anything of value in him.

He turned his head, trying to ignore Tommy, but it was really hard to ignore something so damn loud.

"Everything in this room is yours." Phil laughed as the boy began to pull books off the shelves, asking for each one. "We'll go shopping tomorrow so that you can choose the decorations yourself, what do you say?"

Techno didn't have to look to know what face Tommy was making. His excited voice was more than enough.

"We can go now!"

Phil looked surprised, but rather positive. Well, a child who's not only not afraid of him, but also wants to spend time with him immediately, must have been a nice change.

"It's a little late today," he replied anyway. "But maybe instead I'll give you a moment to settle in, and then we'll have tea on the terrace?"

Tommy skipped all the way to the door. Literally. Techno frowned as Wilbur nodded to the beat of his little feet on the dance floor.

"Okay! Then let's go!"

Phil's expression showed that he was fighting a very intense internal struggle between two opposing forces. One was called 'being responsible', the other - 'quick, before he changes his mind!.

"You don't want to unpack?"

Tommy glanced back, wrinkled his nose, but obediently stepped back and picked up his backpack. And then in one smooth motion he turned it upside down and shook the contents onto the bed.

"Already!" He said cheerfully. "We can go."

Even with very sincere intentions (and Techno had plenty of them), he couldn't be accused of making a mess in this way. Not when two T-shirts, bright red shorts, a few pairs of socks, and a green bandana landed on the bed. He quickly stuffed the latter into his pocket before tossing his backpack to the floor, picking up the peppers from the desk, and trotting over to Phil, clearly expecting praise.

Phil, however, was a little busy staring at the sad mound on the bed with a very unhappy expression on his face.

"Don't you have any more stuff?" He asked with a distinct hint of hope in his voice, as if he was really hoping the child would say that he was just kidding and bring three large suitcases out of nowhere.

But Tommy just pouted, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I *had* more stuff! But they said they stink and they took them from me."

Techno really wanted to be mad, he should be mad, after all the times his own clothes disappeared without a trace for a million reasons, and sometimes without any. But Tommy's surprise at the sight of the washing machine told a lot about his family situation and gave some idea of the condition of his clothes. If what he was wearing now was his best kit, the rest did deserve an accelerated flight to the dumpster.

Phil must have come to a similar conclusion, because he only sighed, glanced once more at the crumpled clothes on the bed, and walked over to the wardrobe, gesturing the child to him.

"I bought some clothes just in case," he said, pulling pajamas and clean, colorful socks off the shelf. Tommy became much more interested in the latter, admiring the planes painted on them with silent delight. "Sam gave me your size, but I think they might be a little too big anyway. They're very..." he hesitated, ignoring Wilbur's meaningful grunt "simple. 'Boring', as someone said." He glanced at his son over his shoulder. "But that's just for a moment. Tomorrow you will be able to choose your own things, how about that?"

The boy's eyes widened.

"I'll get *more* ?"

"Mhm. You must have something to wear, right?"

According to Techno, he didn't have to. He could just sit in the room and silently wait for Sam to come back with the happy news that someone wants him forever. But he didn't say it out loud, because it sounded terrible even to his own ears. On the other hand, he wanted to slam the door behind him, throw himself on the bed and not get out from under the covers

until everything was as before, until it was normal. Even if it were to take months. And if, in the meantime, he dies of hunger, probably no one will notice anyway. Perhaps only Tommy will be happy - because he'll be able to finally enter the room and have more peppers for himself.

He was staring at it very intensely since he followed Phil to the terrace and sat cross-legged on the planks, hunched over a vegetable as if he had never seen anything so fascinating before.

"Can I eat it now?" He asked as Phil handed him a glass of lemonade.

"Sure. If you want, I can cut it for-" He fell silent as the boy, without waiting for the continuation, bit into a vegetable. He immediately grimaced, squeezing his eyes shut tightly as he visibly fought the reflex to spit whatever he had in his mouth. "Oh. I thought so."

Tommy forced himself to swallow and, still grimacing and wiping his mouth with his hand, quickly drained his glass to kill the aftertaste. Phil offered him his, too, without a word. Techno couldn't help but smile. Just a little spitefully.

"Disgusting," said the child, looking at the pepper as if it had committed a tremendous betrayal and had painfully broken his trust. "Yuck," he said, but after a while he took another bite as if he hoped this one would turn out to be better. It didn't.

Phil, amused at first, now frowned.

"Tommy, you don't have to eat that if you don't like it," he said, trying to gently remove the vegetable from his hand, but the boy just tightened his grip and turned his back, making a loud screech. "Tommy..."

"But I'm hungry!"

Techno stopped smiling. Phil blinked and withdrew his hand.

"We have other things to eat, too," he offered gently, and Tommy twitched, relaxed his shoulders a little, and looked at him uncertainly.

"You do?" He made sure, and having received confirmation, looked at the pepper, wrinkled his nose, and almost threw it into Phil's hands. "Okay. You can take it for yourself."

"I'll make toast," Wilbur suggested, jumping up and racing to the door before anyone tried to stop him. And at least two people did.

Techno glanced at Tommy, who had already found himself a new hobby of throwing pebbles at targets, and immediately followed his brother.

"I'm not hungry," he muttered when Phil looked at him questioningly. "And my head hurts."

It wasn't exactly a lie - it was actually humming in his ears and he felt so bloody numb, but it probably had nothing to do with any physical factor. Phil's hand was pleasantly warm though, so he just closed his eyes and patiently let him make sure that no, he definitely wasn't

feverish and no, he wasn't sitting in the sun for too long and no, he definitely doesn't need any medication, all he needs is a bath and a few hours of sleep. It was nice to be in the spotlight again for a while. Much less nice to realize it and feel bloody selfish. How did Wilbur take it all so well? How could he be so confident and act as if Tommy had been here forever? And why did he always have to be so damn perfect and just plain good at doing good things?

When Phil looked into his room two hours later, Techno pretended to be asleep. In fact, he lay on his back for a long time, staring at the ceiling, listening to the laughter coming down from below and wondering why he couldn't be there with them now.

He knew perfectly well why.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Tommy's first day with family just started!

And guys, guys! @Katricia helped me with this chapter :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno remembered their first family camping trip.

The two had just finished elementary school and Phil had been smiling brightly all day, repeating over and over how proud he was of them. Techno didn't complain - he just didn't understand.

"He knows it just works like that and we haven't really done anything?" He asked his brother in a whisper as they sat at the coffee shop table over the largest cups of ice cream he had ever seen.

Wilbur just shrugged, busy licking the chocolate glaze off his fingers and rubbing the remains of it on his pants.

"Don't tell him. Look how happy he is ."

Phil, indeed, seemed even more exhilarated and excited about the vacation than they were. Techno spent the entire evening sitting at the table with him and helping to put together a list of essentials, feeling a surge of pride every time his suggestions were actually written down.

"Good to have you," he heard after he reminded Phil to hide the matches in a metal coffee can in case it rains. "We need such an expert."

Techno had never been an expert on anything before. Certainly no one called him that aloud.

Compared to the heat in the city, the coolness of the forest was a very nice change. Phil parked the car in a small parking lot and before entering the trail handed them his old phones, one of those whose battery lasts for millions of years, and when dropped on the floor, they make a hole in it.

"And you don't move a step without it," he instructed, glancing sternly, especially at the younger boy. "Wilbur, I'm looking at you."

The boy immediately scowled.

"It was only one time," he grunted, but didn't try to argue further, because all three of them knew perfectly well that no, it wasn't 'one time'.

Anyway, he quickly regained his good humor and after a while he was jumping along the forest path, counting every possible stone and waving a stick in front of himself, and yet somehow still falling into every possible spider web. Techno made a huge mistake in joining him at the very beginning and then he stayed as far as possible, because although Phil had patiently made sure that the spider had definitely not decided to move into a pinker place, combed his son's hair a few times to be sure, and finally tied it up in a tight bun and covered it with his own cap, the whole thing was far too embarrassing to risk a repeat. Techno wasn't afraid of spiders, of course not. Or any other bugs. He just didn't like their presence very much, especially near his head.

He helped Phil set up one tent while Wilbur insisted he could handle the other tent himself, and began his work by ramming the pegs upside down. Phil tried to tell him at first, but after the third, "I can do it myself!" he gave up and only looked at his younger child again and again as if he were wondering very intensely where exactly he had made a mistake. Techno felt he was blaming himself unnecessarily. Wilbur was just... unusual. Unusually stupid, to be precise.

"Can I trust you not to take it and run away in the night?" Phil smiled at him over the tent and although it was obvious he was just joking, Techno felt his ears sting anyway.

"I don't know," he muttered, pretending to be suddenly very interested in the pile of materials and tangled lines he was supposed to sleep under that night. "If Wilbur stays like this all the time, I can try."

The mentioned glared at him over his shoulder.

"I can hear you!" He huffed, but then he tried to get up and almost tripped over one of the pegs stuck in the ground. "Daaad! My tent is broken!"

Their tent wasn't broken. Techno, on the other hand, seriously suspected that his brother might be.

They spent the next three days running through the woods learning to make a fire and catch the fish they promptly put back to make Wilbur stop whining and calling them barbarians. They bathed in a nearby lake, and somehow, despite spending several hours a day in the water, Wilbur would come out even dirtier each time. And much happier, but that didn't make him leave any less muddy tracks in the tent. The fourth time it happened, Techno threw his sleeping bag away and categorically forbade him from inside. When Phil returned to camp a few minutes later, he found them rolling on the ground and calling names.

"He hit me!" Wilbur complained, and was immediately pressed more into the sand for it.

"Cause you licked me! Disgusting! Techno scooped up a handful of mud, trying to smear his brother's face, but he quickly pulled back his hand when he felt his teeth on it again. "Phil! Tell him to stop!"

Wilbur stuck out his tongue and oh, how much Techno would rather be an only child and not have to deal with him!

He wanted it a little less when they sat by the fire in the evening, telling scary stories in the light of the fire.

"You won't be able to sleep after that," Phil told them each time, then he did his best to leave them with a lifetime of trauma.

Techno has never been afraid of ghosts and vampires. He had seen more horrible things in life and met much worse monsters. But there was something unsettling about Phil's stories, and he spoke with conviction as if he had experienced each of them personally.

"You can't bring someone back to life," he protested in one of the stories, but to tell you the truth, he wasn't so sure at the time. Wilbur squeezed his hand tightly, for which he was grateful, for he needed that little comfort as much as he was ashamed to ask for it.

Phil shrugged.

"Sometimes you can. There's a place between life and death. It's called "Limbo" and it's the scariest, loneliest place you can imagine."

Wilbur sucked in a breath.

"Like a train station," he whispered in horror.

Phil frowned, dropping out of the role for a moment.

"Can you..." The corners of his mouth twitched in muffled laughter. "Explain your way of thinking to me?"

The boy shook his head.

"No," he whispered as dramatically as before.

They couldn't actually sleep that night. Lying in a dark tent and listening to the wind, the rustling of leaves, and a whole range of sounds that they couldn't identify, they slowly came to the conclusion that nature, despite all its beauty, is sometimes better to admire through the window from a safe house.

Techno really tried to sleep, if only to relieve himself of the fear that the psychopath with the knife was probably already standing in their tent waiting for the right moment, but it was extremely difficult when Wilbur rolled from side to side and fidgeted.

"Hey, Techno?" he said finally, for his own luck, because Techno was ready to invite the murderer in person at any moment to free both of them. But when, with a pained groan, he switched on the flashlight and looked at his brother's face, serious and somewhat confused, he forgot his anger immediately. "Do you ever think about your parents? You know, the biological ones."

Techno frowned and propped himself up on one elbow to see better. Not that they'd never touched on the subject before, but of the two, Wilbur always seemed far more at peace with the past. Sometimes even too much and in a disturbing way.

"No," he shook his head and hesitated. "You...?"

Wilbur's eyes gleamed in the flashlight as he looked anywhere but at his brother.

"Sometimes," he confessed, clearly ashamed for some reason. Which was bloody weird because he usually said idiotic things without any warning or any resistance. Less than a month earlier, when prompted to pair up for the school presentation, he said "I have so much trauma that it should already count as a second person" and nobody was actually surprised anymore. "I don't remember them at all. I don't even know what they looked like. And it's not like anyone could tell me about them, so... I made them up a bit. That they were nice and loved me very much and that..." He bit his lip as he started to play with the zipper on the sleeping bag. "It's stupid. And you'll laugh."

Techno shrugged.

"If it's stupid - I will," he admitted, and was immediately kicked in the knee for it. "But it doesn't sound like it would be."

Wilbur was still actively risking the zipper jam, but he seemed to relax a bit, then finally looked him straight in the eye.

"There was a movie," he began quietly, and Techno instinctively moved closer. "About a girl whose father died and everyone was terrible to her, but in the end it turned out that he was alive after all, only he had lost his memory. We watched it at school. And then... Then I sometimes imagined that my parents forgot about me too, but, like, accidentally, and that they would come back for me as soon as they remembered."

Techno finally reached for his hand to pull it away from the unfortunate zipper.

"It wasn't stupid," he said, and then, perhaps because Wilbur's fingers gripped him a little tighter in mute encouragement, he added, "My parents did forget about me. But I don't think it was an accident."

Wilbur hummed understandingly, propping his cheek with his free hand to keep their faces at the same height.

"Do you miss them sometimes?" He asked almost in a whisper, and Techno immediately and without a second's thought shook his head.

"No. They didn't want me, so I don't want them either."

He wasn't lying, not really. Once he wanted to meet his parents just to ask if this was the fate they really wanted for him, but at some point he realized that he didn't want to know the answer at all. If by some miracle they actually believed that they were giving him a chance for something better, he preferred to leave them with that hope.

Wilbur shifted uneasily, but he didn't let go of his hand.

"I don't know if mine wanted me. I like to think so. But... I haven't missed them at all lately. And even- I even thought that if they did come back now, I wouldn't want to go with them." He frowned. "You think that's wrong? That I thought so? That sounds wrong."

The flashlight cast long shadows on the walls of the tent, but even the rising howling of the wind ceased to seem so disturbing. No more than his brother's expectant look and doubtful eyes. Techno understood him too well. He wouldn't have admitted it out loud, but he knew full well that he was often oversensitive and overreacted to things that weren't worth it. There were times when he wasn't sure he was rightly angry, and it was nice to finally have someone to give a clear verdict. Of course, he could also ask Phil, but he didn't quite understand his task. He always found some smart-sounding explanation and a way to make things sound a little more normal, and while it was usually very reassuring, sometimes Techno needed something completely different. Wilbur was the only one who had the right to listen to his problem and say, 'Yeah, that's totally stupid' without earning a punch to the nose for it.

So he actually thought for a moment before shaking his head.

"I don't know. It doesn't sound bad to me. Sounds like you're happy, which is probably good."

Wilbur watched him silently for a moment, as if he were trying to find the least bit of a lie, but finally he relaxed visibly and smiled slightly.

"I guess so," he admitted, and something in his voice, quiet and finally calm, made Techno feel better too.

He didn't feel better, however, with the fact that the wind was starting to gain strength, so at the next unfamiliar sound Techno opened the zipper with one swift movement and after a moment both of them were pulling their sleeping bags towards the other tent.

"Why am I not surprised at all?" Phil sighed heavily as they tried not to step on his feet and somehow squeezed into a space definitely not designed for so many people. But even if he pouted a little, he hugged them right away, and in the morning he didn't say a word about it.

Techno has always thought that he would do a great job in the woods, and nothing could surprise him. He knew how to find north after moss on trees where mushrooms were edible, and that the water from the stream had to be boiled first and the fruit washed thoroughly. He could build a hut, keep things from getting wet when it rained, he had the brains not to try to sleep on the bare ground, and had a long experience of starving for several days in a row.

But the forest Phil had taken them to was completely different from what he had imagined. Maybe because they had tents, warm sleeping bags, and a set of all-weather clothing. Maybe because they took half of the store with them and enough food to provide all the local animals with supplies for the whole winter. Maybe because he wasn't alone, on his own, and

he didn't have to constantly worry that if anyone found him, if he was caught, they would drive him home immediately. And that he might not survive. Literally, not metaphorically.

Though, truth be told, deep down he suspected it was rather that he had never expected to feel so safe in the middle of nowhere and far from civilization. That he could feel safe eating burnt marshmallows in the middle of the night and listening to Wilbur play his guitar while the soft melody mingles with the crackle of the fire. That he could have so much fun carving swords and making bows that weren't supposed to work, but they carried them everywhere, just in case. That he might be sharing a tent with someone and not thinking about the fact that he should remain vigilant, and that his brother's quiet breathing and his sleepy mumbling may seem reassuring to him.

He only started to understand when they were walking down the overgrown path on the third day, and Phil suddenly stopped and put a finger to his lips.

"Did you hear it?" He whispered after a moment, crouching next to the boys and pointing his hand somewhere high between the treetops. "Nightingale."

And when Techno pricked up his ears, actually catching the bird's song, he suddenly realized that he would never pay attention to it himself. Birds were never something that interested him. They gave him no advantage or helped him survive, and even though their singing was nice, it was also useless.

Techno never had time for useless things. Useless things didn't fill his plate or help him hide or make him less tired or sore. Like the books he had stopped reading at night under the covers because he had missed the creak of the door open too many times. Favorite stuffed animal, for which he fought far too many fights and eventually had to come to terms with defeat. Toothbrush, because someone always, absolutely always did something dirty with it.

Useless things only took time and always led to painful disappointments. He couldn't let them distract him.

It wasn't exactly a good thought; knowing that he probably missed a lot of nice and pretty things in his life for which he didn't have time, or the strength, or the possibilities. But when Phil took his hand and asked if he was okay, Techno nodded, quickly wiping his eyes with sleeve. For although he felt sorry and somehow missed something he never had, when his fingers tightened on Phil's larger, slightly rough hand, he was quite sure that now he could finally listen to the birds whenever he wished.

* * *

When he woke up Saturday morning, he didn't hear any birds. He wouldn't have heard them even if the whole herd had started singing a serenade for him by the window. Not with

Tommy, who was obviously capable of shouting over an entire brass band and was eager to prove it.

Usually, on weekends, Techno would wake up first. He lay in bed for a while, relishing the vision of a day of laziness, until he heard footsteps in the hallway and got out of the sheets to join Phil in the kitchen. They had a whole hour to themselves before Wilbur appeared downstairs, sleepy and with disheveled hair, demanding toast, cocoa, and attention. Techno loved his brother, he really did, and he enjoyed spending time with him just as much - but the brief moment he sat at the table pretending to like coffee and letting Phil braid his hair was special to him. Something quiet, warm and just between them.

The exact opposite of what he found in the kitchen that morning.

There was a smell of fresh coffee in the air, slices of bacon were frying in the frying pan, and right next to it, Tommy, standing on a stool by the counter, was looking over Phil's shoulder, almost nosing at chopped vegetables. He was barefoot, still in his pajamas, his hair tousled, and his hands, from his shoulders to his wrists, painted with felt-tip pens.

"And now what are you doing?" He asked, lifting his head a little higher.

"I'm cutting tomatoes. You like them?"

The boy thought for a moment.

"I don't know," he said finally and held out his hand. "Give me!"

Phil raised his eyebrows, placed a piece of veggie in his palm.

"You should say 'please'," he instructed gently, but without much commitment, so it shouldn't be surprising that Tommy didn't care.

"I know," he just said, shoving the tomato in his mouth and chewing a long moment with a very appraising expression before finally nodding. "Good. And this one?"

"Pepper."

"Again?" He grimaced. "But it's a different color."

"Yhm. It can also be green." Phil reached for his fork and stuck a small chunk on it. "Open your mouth."

The boy hesitated, but curiosity finally took precedence over experience. And he was punished very quickly for it.

"Na-ah!" He shook his head as soon as he touched the pepper with the tip of his tongue. He immediately stepped back, almost falling off the stool, as if afraid that otherwise the food would jump down his throat. "Yuck!"

Phil laughed and handed him a paper towel, amused as he watched the baby clutch it in one hand, wiping his mouth with his sleeve of the other.

"Okay. You're right, it would be too healthy," he joked, and only when he turned to get an extra plate from the cupboard did he realize they were no longer alone. If possible, he smiled even wider. "Oh. Hey, kiddo."

Techno tried very hard to be nice and to summon a bit of enthusiasm, but it was all the more difficult for him as the child didn't want to stop letting him know about his presence.

"Hey," he muttered, and somehow forced himself to smile. Which no one saw, because Tommy chose that moment to try to crack the egg into the bowl and spill half of it on the counter, and Phil turned in a flash to grab the cloth before the egg whipped to the floor. And okay, maybe he turned his attention back to his son right after, but Techno didn't feel like faking anything anymore, sorry, too late, chance was wasted.

"Want to help with breakfast?"

"We're making scrambled eggs!" Tommy interjected, as if he were making too little mess around himself and not spreading enough eggshells to be deduced.

Techno grimaced, completely losing his appetite. It was stupid, he knew it perfectly well. Stupid and childish and utterly pointless, but he really couldn't bring himself to want to have anything to do with the child. Even the food on the plate. Perhaps because it was still early and he practically didn't sleep at night, although he rolled from side to side and tried every possible position. Maybe because he was completely unprepared for the boy's presence. Of course, Techno knew he was coming, but he expected him to hide in corners and tiptoe for at least another week, instead of stuffing himself into every possible gap and shouting more than talking. Or maybe just seeing Phil hanging out with Tommy like it had never been, as if it weren't their time that no one should ever interfere with, made him feel a little jealous.

"I'll eat cereal later," he muttered, pulling on the sleeves of his blouse. He shouldn't feel so out of place. It was his kitchen, damn it, his home, his Saturday morning. Tommy was the intruder here, and he didn't even have the decency to figure it out!

Phil looked at him just as he turned on his heel toward the door.

"You're going out?" He was surprised and for a moment and Techno hesitated, hearing the distinct disappointment in his voice. As if Phil really wanted him to stay. The impression vanished, however, when Tommy started tossing the chopped vegetables into the egg bowl with a loud splash.

Ah, yeah. He wasn't needed here at all. There's already a replacement.

"I'll wake Wilbur," he replied, trying to get out of sight as quickly as possible.

When he knocked on the door the first time, he heard a hollow silence that probably meant that Wilbur was still soundly asleep, thoughts very far away, and waking him up so early for no reason would be sheer cruelty. With all this in mind, and being an exemplary big brother, Techno knocked again, much louder. This time there was a long, hollow murmur from the inside, which he decided to accept as consent.

"Get out..." As soon as he stepped in, Wilbur immediately pulled the covers tighter over his head, reaching for the pillow with his hand and throwing it blindly towards the door. He missed. He wasn't even close. But Techno aimed perfectly when he was repaying him. "Hey! I'll tell dad!"

He swung his legs to try to kick him, but Techno grabbed his ankles in a silent threat as he sat on the bed.

"What do you want?" Wilbur grunted, sticking his head out from under the covers and rubbing his eyes. His tousled hair stuck out in all directions, and there was a pillow mark on his right cheek, but as soon as he stretched and yawned widely, his eyesight instantly sharpened and he frowned. "Why aren't you with dad?" He asked, getting to a seat and wrapping himself with the quilt like a cocoon. "You always say on Saturdays that I shouldn't disturb you, 'cause you have to sit and watch your coffee getting cold or- Ah!" He indignantly pulled back the leg he had just been pinched into. "The hell? What for?!"

Techno scowled at him.

"Phil's busy," he muttered, running his fingers through his hair.

He didn't want it to sound so bitter and so resentful. Ultimately, Phil didn't do anything wrong. He has the right to spend his Saturdays as he likes, like all other days of the week. And if Techno was convinced that Phil liked spending it with him and only with him... well, that's just his problem.

Wilbur wrinkled his nose, clearly not understanding why someone would complain about anything this morning, but then a shadow of understanding flashed across his face.

"Tommy's there," he said more than asked, which was damn out of place, because really, he could at least pretend to be more worried. Techno shrugged, pretending to be completely engrossed in untangling an extremely stubborn tangle. "Oooh... I get it." He nodded, though it was obvious that no, he doesn't 'get it' at all. If only because he smiled immediately and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "So what do you think?"

Techno shrugged.

"Nothing."

"Like usual, no news." Wilbur rolled his eyes, but he beamed even more. "But what do you think about Tommy?"

Techno preferred not to answer this question. Not that he didn't have a lot of thoughts about it - it was just that most of them were not suitable to be shared with anyone.

"Nothing," he just repeated, pulling his legs up onto the mattress and resting his cheek on his knee.

For a moment there was silence in the room, broken only by the hum of the filter in the aquarium. Techno watched Milo swim from one end of the aquarium to the other, completely

unaware that a little more than a year earlier, another fish had been swimming in the same place. Milo the First must have really hated his place, or he simply had very radical views on living at the mercy of a eleven-year-old, because he jumped out of the aquarium at the first opportunity. Techno then voted to buy a new fish immediately, bury the corpse in the garden and pretend nothing had ever happened, but Phil insisted on telling the truth, for some super important reasons. Something about being honest and accepting the loss, that made absolutely no difference as Wilbur cried more than ever before, stayed in his room for a week, and blamed himself for not closing the flap in the aquarium.

"I told you to just buy a new fish," Techno muttered as the very sad and very messy guitar sounds started to come from the upstairs room once again.

Phil just sighed very, very heavily and got up from the table to try to somehow cheer his son for the third time that day.

Milo the Second joined their family a few months later and instantly became the most loved and spoiled fish in the world. Somehow Techno couldn't like him.

"Don't you dare to jump out," he threatened softly, lest anyone hear, putting his nose to the glass. "If you make him cry, I'll put you in the pan."

It's hard to judge whether Milo took this remark to heart or simply wasn't suicidal, but so far he seemed quite content with life, swimming from one end of the aquarium to the other. Techno was a little jealous of him. He once read that goldfish have a short memory and go through a reset every three seconds on average. He wasn't sure how much truth there was to it, but he would have given a lot to be able to erase all of the past, start over with a blank slate, and actually be able to enjoy what he has now.

Like his younger, annoying brother who slipped out from under the covers, sat down behind him and began braiding his hair without asking.

"You know I didn't like you at first?"

Techno looked up, glancing over his shoulder, for which he was slapped on the ear and instructed to sit upright.

"Never heard of that," he snorted. "You were as annoying and obtrusive as you are now."

Wilbur just hummed, but even that was making him smile.

"It only seemed like that to you." He leaned in, whispering straight into his ear. "Because you can't read minds."

Techno leaned back so he could elbow him in the side, but he couldn't hide his smile in time.

"Idiot."

"Yes, that's what I called you too." Wilbur, as if nothing had happened, divided his hair into three parts, starting to braid it. "On better days."

Perhaps if he had said it earlier, in the first month, the first year, it would have been a really nasty thought and Techno would have been more than concerned. But now that they were so close, that they knew practically everything about each other and shared secrets that no one else, not even Phil, knew, knowing that he had made such a horrible first impression was almost amusing. And maybe even a little comforting. If someone was able to endure it when he wanted to show himself from the worse side at all costs, maybe others would accept him if he tried to prove that he could be better.

"But you were nice," he recalled, because he still remembered talking through closed doors.

Wilbur shrugged.

"I was hoping to start liking you later. I've always wanted a brother. You know, a real one. Not only in name." He finished the braid and stared at his handiwork for a moment, then shifted to sit next to Techno on the mattress, so close that their arms touched. Which he immediately used to poke him. "But you were mean and you got mad for no reason and didn't want to talk to me at all. And you were a dick to dad." He frowned and it was easy to see that although the rest of the things were easily forgiven, he was still a bit angry about this one. Techno understood him perfectly. Sometimes it still made him feel guilty. "And every time I thought we would be a million times better without you. But dad cared, and he tried, he really did. And somehow... I don't know." He fell onto his back, folding his hands behind his head. Techno hesitated only a moment before doing the same. "I remember that I also always dreamed that someone would fight for me like that. I didn't want to make it difficult for him." He smiled. "You did it yourself."

Techno glanced at him, trying to look scary.

"Shut up."

"Oh, or what? What are you gonna do to me? Ouch!" He winced as he actually got a pillow in his face. "I'll tell dad!"

"Go on." Techno sat up, pretending he was suddenly very interested in his own fingernails. "Oh, and by the way. Did you know your clothes smell terribly of cigarettes lately?"

Wilbur stopped smiling immediately.

"I don't smoke!" He almost squeaked in a fit of panic, his face turning pale.

Techno hummed, tilting his head.

"Maybe yes, maybe no..."

"No, really, I don't- Schlatt needs someone to guard the door, I'm just standing there, I swear!"

"Mhm. I'm sure Phil will believe that. Let's see!" He took a deep breath. "Phiii-!"

"Shut up! Wilbur lunged to cover his mouth, but quickly withdrew his hand as Techno had already laughed openly at him. "You're mean!"

He was indignant, trying to push him off the bed, but he was far too weak for that, and he was much too easily caught in a murderous hug and pulled to the floor.

"And you're stupid!"

"You stink!"

"You're adopted!"

Wilbur froze for a second, taking a loud breath.

"How *dare* you!" He stopped struggling, putting his weight on his brother instead, putting his hand to his heart. "You hurt me, you prick!"

Techno laughed even louder, although it was difficult for him, because Wilbur wasn't a light one, and was now crushing his entire chest. He was about to do something about it, something that involved pressing someone's face into the floor, when the door suddenly and absolutely unannounced opened.

"Wilbur! Can I feed the fish?" Tommy burst in, completely unmoved by the sight, focused only on the aquarium. "Phil said to ask you!"

Techno reluctantly loosened his grip, letting them both sit down, but to his surprise Wilbur didn't even glance at the child.

After a few seconds of silence, Tommy finally noticed something was wrong and for a moment stopped bouncing in place.

"Wilbur?" He tilted his head to look the older boy in the face, but he was still interested in everything but him. "Please. Can I? I asked. Very nicely!"

Wilbur began examining his hands closely.

"Funny, I almost hear someone," he said, staring at Techno with an astonishment that was actually almost believable. "But no one knocked, so no one could be here."

Tommy flapped his hands in the air.

"Wiiil!" He tried to yank the boy's arm, but the boy remained completely unmoved.

"Guess it's just the wind," he said only, and the child puffed up his cheeks in utter indignation.

"Fine!" He finally exclaimed, marching out of the room, stamping his feet very loudly and closing the door behind him. He immediately knocked loudly. "Can I come in?"

There was almost absolute satisfaction on Wilbur's face.

"You can," he shouted cheerfully, and when the boy came in a second time, he smiled like nothing had happened. "Oh, hey, Tommy. Didn't see you there."

The child scowled at him, but seemed to think it wasn't worth it.

"So can I feed the fish now?"

He could. Of course he could.

Techno left them alone, preoccupied with throwing food into the water, and locked himself in his own room, trying to ignore the annoyance that was building in his chest. He didn't want to be angry, he really didn't want to. He tries to be as understanding and patient as Phil, or at least pretend to be as friendly as Wilbur. But no matter how hard he tried, sooner or later he would always lose his temper.

He thought of Milo swimming all day in circles. He wondered how he would feel if he knew that he was only a replacement for his predecessor. He would probably have forgotten it immediately, but for the whole long three seconds he would have been the saddest fish in the world.

Techno, unfortunately, had a lot more time for it.

Chapter End Notes

I found it funny, that THIS is the moment I wanted as a start of this story. One part, short, simple plot with Tommy moving in with already settled family. But nooo, I had to add ✨trauma✨ and make it so fucking long...
(It's Wilbur's fault tho, I just really didn't like how he acted in my first draft, lol)

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

@Katricia made this chapter better! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno didn't feel like shopping. Unfortunately for him, he had no say in it, because Phil could be damn persuasive whenever he wanted to. He didn't even have to say anything, it was enough that he looked at them with sad eyes and sighed a few times as if they had hurt him to death, but 'no, no, don't worry about me, I'm old and boring, I know, I'll just go choose a tombstone.' Techno absolutely hated it and despised himself for succumbing so easily.

Being in the same car with Tommy turned out to be even worse than sharing the house with him. The boy was hanging around in the back seat, asking a million questions a minute, especially questions no one didn't know the answer to, and he had to be reminded a couple of times not to unfasten his seat belt and try to walk between the seats to press the horn. Eventually, Wilbur shared his headphones with him, which somewhat solved the problem. For a few minutes before the child learned the lyrics and picked up the habit of singing out loud. Techno wanted to kill them both, but since Phil looked like he hadn't had a better time in a long time, he somehow managed to keep his anger in check.

As usual on Saturdays, the shops were crowded, noisy and way too hot even with the air conditioning on. Techno could feel his hoodie sticking to his back after a few minutes, but it was still a better option than leaving it in the car. On some days he was able to bring himself to wear short sleeves to school, but places full of strangers, adult people were still well beyond his comfort zone.

"They have a pet shop upstairs," he offered as Tommy let go of Phil's hand for the fourth time without warning and ran into the crowd for a closer look at a display. "We can buy a leash for him. And a muzzle."

"Or we can try to sell you to them." Wilbur nudged him with his shoulder. "Or at least change for something cool." He smirked, but by the time Techno could respond, or even glare at him, Wil had already lost interest in the subject. "Tommy, Tommy! Look!"

He grabbed the child by the T-shirt, dragging him towards one of the shops. Phil just spread his hands helplessly, his authority long ignored and forgotten.

"Okay," he sighed, following his son, although it was clear that he didn't really mind that two of his three kids were energetic. "So clothes first."

As it turned out, Tommy had just enough patience to limit himself to fiddling with his legs for a few seconds while Phil held his shirts up to his back, trying to figure out the right size.

Soon after, he ran between the hangers, almost knocking over one of them, and Wilbur needed no further encouragement to rush after him to the source of all the chaos. Both acted as if no one had ever let them out of their cage in the zoo before and Techno tried not to even peek in their direction so as not to accidentally become associated with them. The corner of his eye watched as Wilbur tried to make Tommy a small copy of himself, carefully choosing his clothes and every now and then graciously accepting a dinosaur T-shirt or very bright socks. Besides that - Techno ignored them completely, lurking among the shelves. After all, he had his own, very important and adult matters to do, and he didn't refresh the same page on the phone for the fourth time, so as not to die of boredom, or to be twisted with jealousy whenever he heard their laughter. He would never.

"Do you see something for yourself?" Phil appeared next to him, basket almost full and a baseball cap in his hand, which he immediately threw over the boy's head, pulling it tightly over his eyes. "It would be easier for you to look a little above the screen, you know?"

Techno winced as he pulled off his cap, but hesitated before tossing it to the nearest shelf. It wasn't that bad. Pale yellow, with a golden crown in the center - quite his style. He pulled it back over his hair.

"I don't need anything," he said, pretending not to see as Phil smiled with satisfaction.

"For sure? I swear you're both doing nothing lately, just growing." He sighed dramatically, resting his forearm on the boy's head. "Soon you'll be taller than me."

Techno rolled his eyes but didn't knock his hand off.

"I'm looking forward to it," he muttered, which probably no one heard, because Tommy had just run up to them pretending to be an airplane and tossed another T-shirt into the basket.

Phil grinned as he watched him go.

"I think they're having a good time," he said, and Techno chose not to tell him that Wilbur was glancing far too often at the cash registers and probably just waiting for a moment to use Tommy as a smoke screen and get to the store's microphone. Phil had a stressful life with them anyway, he deserved two minutes of blissful ignorance. "You know..." He slipped his hand down, placing it on the boy's hair and resting his chin on it, pulling him a little closer. Ever since Techno began to shy away from being hugged like a little child, Phil has gotten surprisingly creative about finding ways to bypass the system. And he didn't hide it at all. "I understand you're very grown up now, but it's okay if you just have a good time. You don't have to be so serious all the time."

There was no harshness or reprimand in his voice, rather sincere concern and a hint of longing, but the boy grimaced anyway as he stepped away.

"I like it this way."

If Phil was disappointed, he didn't show it.

"Sure," he nodded. Then he pulled the cap over his eyes again. "But if you change your mind..." He hesitated and pulled back a little so he could brush his hair out of his face. "I miss you sometimes, you know?"

The boy frowned.

"I haven't gone anywhere."

"I know." Phil nodded and for a moment just stared at him silently, as intently as if he were looking for something important. It was hard to judge if he had found it when he squeezed his arm a little tighter for the last time and finally released him from his embrace. "I'm just old and sentimental."

Techno wasn't sure if he should accept this answer, or if he should draw any deeper conclusions from it. Phil liked to be puzzling at times for no reason at all. But he had to say something, so after a moment of rocking on his heels and stuffing his hands into his pockets so far he almost broke through, he finally chose the safest option.

"Are you really gonna buy it all?" He nodded at the nearly full basket. "You know most of this is 'Wilbur, but a few sizes too small'?"

Phil reached into the basket, fishing out the first T-shirt on the edge. Techno was absolutely convinced that this morning he had seen an identical one littering in a chair in his brother's room. He held the material between his fingers for a moment, with a strangely grave, imaginary expression, before finally carefully placing it among the others.

"I don't think Tommy has his own taste at the moment," he said, clearly putting a lot of effort into choosing his words. "He probably didn't have the opportunity to choose things himself before. Let him try out different options."

Techno looked down at the floor, feeling an unpleasant cramp in his stomach. Because while Phil never quite understood, couldn't understand, not really, not in the way Techno and Wilbur understood each other, he knew how to be damn smart at times.

Tommy ran around the store, laughing and screaming whenever Wilbur forcefully pulled another sweatshirt over his head to see if it would fit. He definitely didn't seem unhappy or aggrieved. But the way he looked at everything, with silent delight and disbelief, the way he touched each successive thing, as if making sure it really existed, the way he asked a million times if he could get something...

Techno didn't like the feeling that was starting to build in him then. He didn't like the sincere sympathy he couldn't control, and the utterly automatic thought that maybe the kid wasn't that bad after all. Loud and annoying, yes, but also somehow perfectly suited to their family.

He shook his head. It's only temporary, only for a while, there's no point even trying...

"He's weird," he muttered softly, more to himself. But Phil heard and looked at him disapprovingly.

"Not at all. He just reacts in his own way. You behaved differently from Wilbur, too," he recalled, and Techno winced. The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that he wasn't bothered by Tommy's behavior in itself, but rather by how horrible he looked compared to him. There was no way this knowledge made him feel better. "Although you were actually cooperative in the shopping. It took Wilbur half a year to pull himself together enough to tell me he didn't like most of what I chose for him!"

"What are you talking about?" Wilbur materialized next to him so unexpectedly that Techno jumped. He glared at his brother, partly angry at the mini-heart attack, partly at the fact that Tommy immediately appeared next to him, ready to fill all the free space with himself.

"That you have no taste."

Wilbur sucked in a breath.

"I have great taste! Right, Tommy?"

The boy nodded so vigorously that his cap fell off and he had to quickly lift it off the floor.

"Yes!" He supported, then hesitated, frowned, and tugged on Wilbur's sleeve, lowering his voice to a whisper. "What does that mean?"

"That I know what's pretty."

"Wilbur has lots of taste! It helps me to choose!"

Techno rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, because Phil's paying, not him."

Tommy opened his mouth, but then closed it, tilted his head, and measured the older boy up and down the house.

"And what are you here for?"

Techno exploded with indignation. He knew it was probably not going to sound that way at all, and the child meant something else entirely, but he felt deeply offended anyway. Gremlin just invites himself into his house, bends all the rules there, and now had the audacity to question his place in the family hierarchy. Were it not for the kid being twice as small and probably five times weaker, Techno was seriously considering giving him a hard kick.

Wilbur must have sensed his mood, and his rapidly worsening, as he threw an arm around his neck, pointing at him with his free hand, as if presenting him to a wider audience.

"He's our bodyguard. Look at the scowl he makes."

He squeezed his brother's cheeks, trying to form what appeared to be a smile. If anyone else did that, they'd lose his fingers. In the name of brotherhood and for personal reasons, Wilbur was given a three-second lead. Which, for his own good, he took advantage of.

"Piss off." Despite everything, Techno pushed him away, just for the balance of the universe.

Tommy wrinkled his nose, glancing up, then stood on tiptoe as if those few extra centimeters were actually going to give him an edge.

"I'm not afraid of him at all!" He announced, proudly sticking out his chest, into which one swipe would knock him to the ground.

Techno miraculously fought the temptation.

"You should be," he only muttered. If he had admitted the thought that the kid might have some minor upsides just a moment earlier, now he got rid of those thoughts for good.

Even before they left the checkout (Wilbur ran back into the store three times to add something to the basket at the last minute), he had enough shopping for a good few weeks. He was hot, the crowds around him made him want to squeeze into the farthest corner and never get out of it, the music was far too loud from the speakers, and they all seemed to be doing their best to be as loud as possible just to spite him. The thought that they still have to pick up decorations for the kid's room made him want to scream.

Phil must have realized by now that he had overestimated his strength a bit and went to a shootout with a knife, because although he was still smiling and patiently listening to the stories of all the miracles Tubbo performs five times a day, probably including walking on water, he looked a lot more tired than an hour ago.

"Tommy." He crouched down in front of the child, waiting for a moment until he stopped wandering and focused a minimum of attention on him. "It's a big store and it's easy to get lost, so you have to stay very close, okay?"

The boy immediately grabbed his hand tightly, twitching with excitement.

"Aha!"

"You can't go anywhere alone. If you see something interesting and want to watch it closely, you have to tell me."

"Aha!"

"You can also go with Techno or Wilbur, but you're to stick together and not suddenly disappear from my sight."

"Aha!" The boy started bouncing in place, obviously not listening. As long as he ever really started. "Can we go now? Can we?"

Phil just sighed heavily, looking at peace with his fate. Very rightly, as it turned out, because at first the boy was really interested in everything, from the posters to the color of the new sheets, but his concentration resources turned out to be extremely meager. It was less than twenty minutes before Phil first had to search for him between the shelves, and twice as long before Wilbur shoved the child into the cart with the groceries and decided to test its maneuverability by racing down the crowded aisles at breakneck speed.

"If you don't calm down, you'll both be waiting in the car," Phil threatened as soon as he finished making sure neither of them was hurt, with the wall they hit most severely affected. "And I'm absolutely serious."

"But it was fun!" Wilbur said indignantly, clearly showing that the collision hadn't confused him, and certainly hadn't hammered an ounce of sense into him.

Phil glared at him.

"You know what's gonna be really fun? If we all live to go home in one piece." He grabbed one boy with one hand, the other with the other and dragged him along, completely ignoring Wilbur's protests about being treated like a child. "Techno, can you...?"

Techno grabbed the cart without a word, jogging to follow the others. But he couldn't resist the temptation not to catch up with Phil and look at him meaningfully.

"You still want me to stop acting serious?"

A very telling murmur and an unfavorable look answered him.

Every time Phil tried to be angry for more than two minutes, Techno began to suspect again that he was from some other planet, and most likely a completely different galaxy. Although maybe he himself just spent a little too much time among people for whom anger was their basic emotion and a permanent state. Whatever the cause, Phil always looked as if getting mad at them and their stupid ideas cost him a whole lot of energy, pushed him through an existential crisis, and in the end turned out to be utterly unworthy of the trouble.

Like when all the teachers collectively decided to pay attention to what was happening in school for a change, and showed great concern about Wilbur's 'gambling tendencies'.

"I told you, right?" Phil glanced at them menacingly in the rearview mirror as they got into the car. His tone was rough and his expression harsh, and Techno suddenly felt very comfortable with the fact that he wasn't the one in trouble. "I told you absolutely not to play cards for money."

Wilbur crossed his arms and prodded his backpack with his foot, which was tossed casually on the floor behind the front seat.

"But I wasn't the one playing!" He was indignant because, apparently, he really believed it would be a great idea to remind Phil of the little card club he ran. "And not for money, but for stones!"

Phil sucked in a breath and, taking advantage of the fact that they were standing in the red light, closed his eyes, rubbing his face with his hands. Techno almost expected his fingers to make dents in the steering wheel, as he gripped it so tightly all the way. He was holding his breath for a few seconds, leaning his head against the headrest, and no one dared tell him he was ready to move. Except for the driver from the car behind them, who immediately began to taunt the horn. Even so, by the time they finally left the intersection, Phil seemed much calmer now and 'I'm not angry, just disappointed' was getting closer to the truth.

"Just some regular stones?" He asked, in a tone that betrayed that he knew the answer perfectly well, but prefers for the victim to trap herself. "Wilbur," he urged when he got no answer.

The boy turned his face to the window, shifting nervously. Techno was really starting to feel sorry for him. Not enough to speak up and remind everyone of his existence, but to telepathically send him words of support and motivating slogans. Although maybe not. Wilbur had a lot of motivation and willingness to implement each of his ideas, and that is what the vast majority of his problems resulted from.

"Special stones."

"Yhm. And where can you get them from?"

The boy shrugged.

"You can buy them."

"Where?"

This time Wilbur took his time with his reply, and only under the influence of another sharp glance in the mirror did he mumble:

"From me... But they didn't play for money!" He was outraged again, then stopped when Phil raised his hand. Techno has never been so interested in the view outside the window as it is now. Street and lots of houses. A very nice view, really. He would like to become a part of it.

In the silence of a few seconds, his own thoughts felt bloody loud, and he didn't like it at all.

"Wilbur." Phil finally sighed heavily as he pulled down the driveway and turned off the engine, but made no move to open the door or at least unfasten the seat belt. The boys agreed that it was better to imitate him. "I know you think it was very clever-"

Wilbur nodded.

"It was," he said with a pride that he really shouldn't be showing now. Sometimes Techno admired his courage and charisma. And sometimes, like now, he felt a little sorry that in a few years his brother would most likely end up dead at the bottom of the river after charisma didn't work on very inappropriate people.

Phil frowned, but the comment was deafening.

"But just because you can find a way around the rules doesn't mean you should."

"But you said clearly: don't play for-!"

"Wilbur." This time Phil turned in his seat to look directly at his son, who instantly lost all his assertiveness. "You're bloody smart, so don't pretend you don't understand. You knew exactly what you were doing," he said dryly. Then suddenly he looked at the other boy and frowned. "Techno was involved in this?"

Wilbur shook his head.

"No."

Techno hastily slipped his hands into his pockets to stuff the two decks of cards a little deeper.

"Would you tell me if he was?"

"No," Wilbur repeated as firmly, which was nice on the one hand, stupid on the other, and utterly self-defeating.

Phil must have come to similar conclusions because he just grimaced.

"At least you're being honest," he said, then dropped his back into the driver's seat again.

"And what am I supposed to do with you, huh?"

The boy shrugged innocently.

"Love and forgive?"

Techno, like most kids his age, was naturally curious about the world and eagerly absorbed knowledge in any form. That's why he watched with fascination as Phil perfectly portrayed all the stages of mourning, from denial, through anger, despair, to accepting his educational failure.

"You really think you're so damn smart, huh?" He sighed at last, but although the way he hunched over the steering wheel rubbing his eyes was tired, his voice was much softer and almost playful.

Wilbur grinned broadly.

"I am," he nodded, nudging his brother with his shoulder as if to say, 'This's how you do it.'

Techno had serious doubts that it was actually the best possible method, given that Wilbur, in the end, had been grounded for a month anyway, but had to give him credit that even when he was losing, it was usually in style and with his head high in the air.

He certainly didn't care much now either, and very quickly found himself some new amusement, accosting Tommy, teasing him in all possible ways and pretending to be innocent just as the boy actually leaped towards him. Phil, at first trying to keep them in check, eventually gave up and let them run around him, make noise and be a nightmare for any normal shopping person.

"Phiiil!" Tommy tugged on his sleeve, dragging his name. "Can I take one? I can?" He waved the bee-shaped key ring in the air. "For Tubbo. Tubbo likes bees."

Phil glanced at the key ring, and the resignation on his face was immediately filled with affection.

"Go ahead," he encouraged, and Tommy immediately ran to the cart to put the toy in its place of honor, making sure it was not falling out several times. Techno was seriously starting to wonder if he was the only one who felt a bit uncomfortable with the fact that the boy probably didn't quite understand that he would most likely never see his friend again.

He didn't have time to come to any concrete conclusions before the answer came to him on its own. More specifically, Tommy suddenly grunted, hesitated, and then, much less confidently than before, extended a clenched hand toward Phil.

"Can I- Can I get another one?" He asked, slowly relaxing his fingers to reveal another, slightly smaller, green heart-shaped key ring. "For mom."

With all his reluctance and irritation, Techno couldn't honestly say that he wasn't hurt by this innocent request. Mostly because he had a great view of Phil's expression. Wilbur, so far busy digging through the shelves of atlases, also froze for a second before slowly turning to exchange knowing looks with his brother.

Phil was silent for a moment, clearly analyzing the situation, very intensely and from every possible angle, upside down and backwards, before finally giving up and accepting the fact that there was no right answer. Not when they're in a shop full of people, probably the last place for that kind of conversation.

"Sure." He smiled, a little artificially, ruffling the child's hair in an extremely protective way. "I'm sure she would like it very much."

Tommy twisted the pendant in his fingers.

"She never likes anything," he said softly, without even a hint of his normal enthusiasm. But he gripped the key ring tightly in his hand, not putting it down for a second, even as Wilbur pulled it towards the stuffed animal aisle.

"You can pick one!"

The boy's eyes widened, his cheeks flushed with excitement, and his humor immediately returned.

"Anyone I want?" He made sure before trotting down the shelves. In less than a minute he stopped abruptly, climbed on his toes, and pulled from one of them a large brown cow, almost as big as him. "Wilbur! Look!" He ran to the older boy, tilting his head to see anything from behind the mascot and almost stumbling over the plush tail. "I'll call him Henry!"

Wilbur raised his eyebrows.

"It's a cow, Tommy," he said very seriously, although it was obvious that he was struggling to hold back a laugh.

The child looked at him as if he was just trying to teach them that the sun is bright and it gets dark at night.

"I know it's a cow." He pressed the stuffed animal a little tighter to his chest. "I like cows."

"All cows are girls, you idiot."

The boy looked genuinely indignant.

"That's not true!"

"It is."

"Na-ah!"

"Ye-ah."

"It's a boy!"

"Because...?"

Tommy made a face at him.

"Because his name is Henry?"

In the face of such a powerful argument, Wilbur had no choice but to capitulate.

"Ah." He cleared his throat to mask his laughter. "If you put it that way..."

That way, Henry, whatever gender it was, officially became part of the family. If Techno were still a child, not practically an adult, but a little younger, he would have promised himself to keep Steve away from both him and his owner. But he was thirteen, not six, so by no means did he.

On a positive note, Tommy had been surprisingly calm all the way back, too absorbed in delight with Wilbur's card tricks to wreak havoc and destruction around him. On the less positive note - Wilbur was only paying attention to him as well, and while Techno tried not to think about it, he still felt a bit rejected.

And it didn't make him feel any better that all the seats at the table were taken when he showed up for dinner in the evening.

"That's my seat." He prodded the stuffed animal that occupied his chair, but Tommy let out a warning squeak as he lunged to shield his new friend.

"But Henry has nowhere to sit!"

Techno raised his eyebrows.

"And why should I care?"

As kindness, he gave the baby a full three seconds, for any more sensible argument, before pulling the stuffed animal up again. Perhaps a little harder than necessary, because Tommy, clinging to the mascot as if his life depended on it, hovered a few centimeters above the chair

for a second and kicked the table hard enough to make the glasses shake. Wilbur just held his, busy tapping the phone, but Phil looked at him with obvious disappointment.

"Techno..." he sighed heavily, rubbing his eyes. "Just get a chair from the kitchen, okay?"

Techno reluctantly let go of the mascot, crossing his arms over his chest and not moving an inch.

"But it's his toy, let him bring it himself."

Wilbur looked up from the phone, glancing from one to the other.

"No!" Tommy, practically lying in both chairs, clung to their backrests as much as the conditions and anatomy would allow. "If I go away, you will take both and nothing will be left!"

"Aa I should!" Techno reached out to grab not a soft toy by the collar this time, but a small gremlin, but stopped himself when he saw Phil's expression. He might not be good at getting angry, but he could certainly make it clear that someone was starting to cross the line.

It grew quiet around the table. Tommy still acted like everyone else was trying to kill him. Techno didn't move even a millimeter. Phil looked like he was expecting a miracle as a reward for all his suffering in the name of good parenting.

Wilbur, who had been watching the situation from a safe distance so far, rolled his eyes, made a very dramatic grunt, and shuffled his chair loudly as he got up from the table.

"You guys have problems, really..." He snorted, disappearing into the kitchen, from where he returned after a while, dragging a chair behind him. He set it up in the corner of the table between Tommy and Phil and held out his hand expectantly.

Tommy hesitated, but after a while he actually rose to a seat and handed him the stuffed animal.

"But now he's sitting on the side!" He complained because, apparently, no one had ever taught him an ounce of gratitude. "And he's alone and he looks sad!"

Techno was already opening his mouth to tell him to shut up, but Wilbur was first.

"He looks like a king," he said, pointing at the animal with his fork. "Kings used to sit this way to make them stand out and let everyone know they were important."

Techno had a lot to say about the historical credibility of this fact, but seeing that the child accepted the solution, he decided to withdraw as well. Temporarily. And as an exception.

Tommy forgot about the whole thing as soon as the food appeared on the table.

"You eat like this every day?" He asked, filling his plate in no time and packing in his mouth much more than he could swallow. Predictably, he choked, but learned nothing and immediately took another bite. "You're really rich!"

Phil watched him, smiling, though Techno would bet he now has a million different emotions in his head and joy is none of them.

"I'm glad you like it."

He definitely did, judging from the boy emptying his plate as fast as if he were in a competition. Interestingly, his cutlery remained spotlessly clean - not used. But no one paid it any attention, even as he licked the sauce off his fingers and Techno concluded that it wasn't worth spoiling the atmosphere completely. But when a tiny hand suddenly found its way to his plate and for his potato, he instinctively and without hesitation tried to stab it with a fork. And he almost hit it.

Tommy jumped back, pressing his hand to his chest and looked at Phil for support, but this time he had seriously miscalculated.

"Tommy, don't do that," he heard, and he puffed up his cheeks, making an insulted face. But he quickly forgot how hurt he was when Phil began to put more food on his plate. "You can always ask for more. And you can take whatever you want from me, but leave your brothers' plates alone, okay?"

Techno grimaced, utterly indignant at using the word 'brother' in the context of anyone but Wilbur, but no one paid much attention to him. As they had all day. Apparently everyone enjoyed ignoring his existence.

Tommy cocked his head, his food for a moment forgetting.

"Why?" He asked, to which the only correct answer should be 'Not your business, brat.'

Wilbur shrugged.

"Because we're nuts about food," he replied with his mouth full, and Phil looked at him with a mute 'Do I expect too much?' "It's true, isn't it? There used to be a lot of shit going on," he continued, completely unfazed. But at least he finally swallowed. "Before Phil took us in."

Tommy, understandably, looked even more puzzled than before.

"I thought Phil was your dad?"

Wilbur took another bite, leaving him waiting.

"He is," he nodded finally, and it was hard not to notice the tenderness with which Phil looked at him. "We're adopted."

"Oh." Tommy nodded, though you could see he was still processing the data and analyzing the results. Finally, after a long moment of wrinkling his nose and kicking a chair leg, he turned to Techno. "You too?" He made sure as if for some reason it was fucking unbelievable. "But if Phil is your dad, why do you call him by his name?"

Techno froze for a moment, fork halfway to his mouth before he slowly put it back on his plate and looked at the boy. He wanted to be angry with him, for asking such a question, he

wanted to see it as ill-will and really believe it was some trick and an attempt to turn Phil against him, but he couldn't find anything but genuine curiosity in his face. Which, in fact, was five times worse. He would have a ready answer for any claims or reproaches. Without boasting, he was very good at telling people to fuck off and watch his nose. But it was stupid to be offended and angry when Tommy looked at him so innocently and just wanted to know.

The main problem is that Techno couldn't explain.

Twice in his life he came across 'parents' who were very attached to the issue of their correct titling. Neither took it well that the more they pushed, the more he flatly refused. He still had scars from the matured respecting of his free will by some of them. Although, to tell the truth, he had much worse memories of his second home, where he finally got broken. He was much younger, a little less stubborn, and the woman had absolutely forbidden him to speak unless he did it 'the right way.' He still remembered her triumphant expression as she placed the empty plate in front of him and smiled, inviting him to ask for food. When she took his things and ignored any protest because 'You didn't use the right word, honey.' When she locked the bathroom with a key, because he could always ask for it, he just had to be polite and obedient and-

He lasted four days. To this day, his stomach felt twisted whenever he heard the word 'mother'.

Phil had never tried to force him to do anything and Techno was sincerely grateful to him for that. He was even more grateful when he realized that Phil wasn't going to even ask for anything from him, wouldn't persuade him or expect an explanation, that he didn't expect anything and would accept whatever Techno wanted to give him. And maybe that would be enough. Perhaps this gesture of absolute understanding and respect for his opinion would become the key to overcome his stubbornness once and for all.

But this would be the second time someone had tried this method. And Techno still remembered how it had ended before.

He pursed his lips as he squeezed the fork tighter and began to smear any leftover food all over the plate.

"Because I chose to."

Tommy clearly couldn't sense the change in atmosphere, and he certainly couldn't tell when it was safer to keep quiet.

"That's really stupid of you" he said, and went back to eating again, completely unconcerned with how close he was to death. If Techno didn't feel the watchful eye on him from across the table, he'd be more than ready to kill the brat on the spot with only his fists and goddamn potatoes at his disposal.

"Tommy." Phil looked at the child a little sharper than before. "There's nothing wrong with Techno calling me by name."

"But that's stupid!"

"No, not at all. You just never heard of that before. Just because you don't know something doesn't mean it's bad."

The boy crossed his arms, hitting his back hard against the back of the chair.

"I didn't know the peppers," he said, which would actually be a worthwhile argument if it made any sense. "And it was yucky."

"You didn't know Henry either," Wilbur remarked, probably earning himself the title of the worst traitor deserving immediate execution.

"But that's different! Henry's a cow. Cows are great!"

Techno really wanted to be able to say that he was smarter than a six-year-old and wouldn't be provoked by stupid taunts. That he can control himself, understands his own emotions and has enough self-control to take a deep breath in a moment of anger and stay on the safe side of the invisible border. That he was as grown up as he likes to think he was and that he could make proper use of this maturity. He really did, really wanted to, especially seeing Phil looking pleadingly at him, Phil, who had lost far too much nerve today and deserved a moment of rest.

But he couldn't.

"You know you're eating a cow right now, don't you?" He pointed with his fork at the plate and the boy froze instantly.

"What?" He looked from his hand to the steak and back again.

Phil rested elbows on the table, hiding face in hands, but even this helpless gesture didn't make Techno bite his tongue.

"Cow," he repeated, keeping his face stony, which was all the more difficult since Wilbur had just kicked him under the table. "On your plate."

Tommy's eyes widened, and his breathing quickened.

"No, not true," he insisted, but he was clearly losing confidence by the second. "You can't eat cows. Cows- Cows give milk. And they're nice."

Techno nodded.

"Yhm. And very tasty."

Still, he felt a little bad about himself when the kid's lips twitched and his eyes filled with tears.

"Phiii! Techno says-!"

Phil sighed heavily, slowly revealing his face and laying his hands flat on the table. Probably so that neither of the boys would think he was planning to use them, even if his expression

showed he was very eager to do so.

"I heard what he said." He looked at his older son in such a way that he immediately regretted speaking at all. For a while. A very short one. "I'm afraid he's telling the truth."

Tommy hugged Henry tightly to his chest, sniffing loudly.

"You *killed the cow*?"

"No!" Phil immediately protested, but since he had his rules about honesty and dead goldfish, he immediately added, "Well, it was dead when I bought it, so *technically*- Tommy!" He jumped up from the table and followed the boy up the stairs. "Wait! Please!"

Somewhere upstairs there was a dull slam of the door, followed by a soft exhortation and first attempts at negotiation, which Techno tried very hard to ignore. What he couldn't ignore was another kick, really hard this time.

"What?" He snapped, massaging his knee.

Wilbur shrugged as if nothing had happened.

"Nothing," he said, although the tone showed that he had a problem with something. "But did you have to?"

The honest answer was 'no', and Techno was well aware of that. His only reason to try to traumatize a child for life was 'Because I don't like him,' which was, objectively, a very weak argument. One of those who you don't speak out loud because they only make things worse.

"It's not my fault he doesn't know where food comes from," he muttered instead, and was kicked in the knee for the third time.

"He's six. Let him think that food comes from the grocery store and the chocolate milk comes from brown cows."

Techno didn't have a good answer to that either. Perhaps because he had never had the opportunity to believe that the food came from anywhere other than a locked fridge.

He pressed his back into the chair.

"He irritates me."

"Everything irritates you." Wilbur rolled his eyes, but as always, he didn't know how to be angry for long and his eyes softened almost immediately. "Want to listen to my new song? After Phil goes through an existential crisis?"

Techno wanted. Not so much for the song itself - although, admittedly, his brother really was talented - but more because of some strange, slightly embarrassing need to confirm that he was still important to him. Tommy might be funny, he might admire disappearing cards and fit perfectly in a store basket, but was definitely not one of them. He wasn't their brother, even if Phil called him that a million times. He was a stranger and here only for a while.

But even so, when Phil returned to the living room a good quarter of an hour later, clearly tired and in a much worse mood, Techno felt a little guilty. Maybe even a little more than a little. Not that he was sorry, not really, but a small voice in his head was telling him that he also had no reason to be proud of himself.

"I'll help," he offered, and without waiting for an answer, he started picking up the empty plates while trying to pretend to be completely relaxed and avoid Phil's gaze in all possible ways. Wilbur looked first at one, then at the other, before shaking his head and turning towards the stairs. Fortunately, he didn't try to comment.

They washed dishes in silence, Techno splashing the water around even more than usual, completely unable to concentrate, Phil wiping the dishes, glancing at him again and again with an unreadable expression. Just over two years ago, when Techno first entered the house, nothing scared him more than just that look. That absolute peace and concentration to which he wasn't used to and which he sometimes didn't understand even today. Techno hated it when people acted like this, when they lied, when they tried to lull him from vigilance, when they pretended to be nice, so that the next blow would be even more painful.

Most of his previous parents looked 'nice'. Most were nice, until he was left alone with them, until the door closed behind Nate, until he spoke, moved, breathed too loudly...

His 'mother' called him 'honey', at the same time gripping his arm so tightly that it left bruises. One of his 'fathers' was chatting happily with his neighbor a few minutes after Techno fell down the stairs by complete accident and without any help. Another loved to present him to his friends as a very exotic specimen in the zoo, considering it to be the height of humor to point out each of its flaws, starting with the name and ending with the fact that he 'stands crookedly'.

He shuddered at the touch on his shoulder, but then calmed down as he looked up to meet a familiar face.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." Phil withdrew his hand but didn't pull away, leaving him with a choice. "I called you, but you must have been thinking."

Techno looked down at his hands, up to their elbows in the water. The skin on his fingers wrinkled with the dampness.

"I remembered something," he said finally, reaching for a cloth to wipe his hands. There were still glasses and a few cutlery in the sink, but he couldn't think of them at all.

Phil probably couldn't too, because he didn't even glance that way. He put the last, dry plate on the table, and as soon as Techno sat down on the nearest chair, he immediately circled him, reaching for boy's hair in a natural way. He loosened the braid and ran fingers through it for a moment, slowly and carefully, before he braided it a second time. It didn't make much sense, since the boy was about to take it out before his bath anyway, but Phil liked the little gestures and the closeness, and Techno rarely knew how to say no to him. He might be too big to still cuddle and fawn like a little baby, but for that one thing he was able to make an exception. And maybe, although he would never admit it, sometimes he did need it too.

"You know you can tell me if something is wrong?"

Techno knew. In theory. Of course he knew, and of course he could. And of course Phil would react to absolutely anything with the same understanding and tenderness as ever. There was no doubt about it. But it didn't make him feel any less guilty for wanting to pour out all his troubles on him.

Once upon a time, when they were younger, Phil compared telling bad things to carrying heavy luggage.

"If you had a very large bag of stones, wouldn't it be easier for you if you asked for help?"

Wilbur looked at him incredulously.

"If I had a bag of stones in the previous house, I would have thrown them at someone."

Phil pursed his lips, and it was obvious that it took a lot of effort not to laugh.

"It's hard to disagree," he admitted, ruffling his hair. "But I'm afraid these stones can hurt only you."

Techno didn't consider his past to be like a bag of stones, neither ordinary nor magical nor imaginary. He thought it looked a lot like bloody rat poison. And sharing poisons, as history has shown more than once, usually didn't do any good.

"Everything's fine, really," he muttered, shuffling his feet on the floor. "Don't panic."

Phil sucked in a breath and held it for a moment before sighed in resignation.

"I'm just worried. You were a bit mean today."

There was a clear rebuke in his voice, despite all his concern, and Techno instinctively sank a little lower in his chair, genuinely ashamed. Tommy might not have run away at the mere sight of the new guardian, but that didn't give anyone the right to put his trust to the test. Even if it was just a child's belief that animals were made only to be loved and petted.

On the other hand, he was still irritated and the last thing that would go down his throat was 'I'm sorry, I got carried away,' so, going constricted, he just mumbled:

"I'm always like that."

Which, basically, was largely true. But not in Phil's eyes.

"That's not true," he said, perhaps a bit offended on his behalf. "You're usually very nice. If you want to be. Tommy doesn't know you yet, he won't know you're just kidding. He's going to take everything personally, so please be a little more careful, okay? At least in the beginning."

"He didn't seem to care much about my opinion."

"Is it because he took your place?" He asked, and Techno grimaced, because yes, that's exactly what it was about. But in a completely different sense than Phil assumed.

"He made a fuss, and it's just a stupid stuffed animal," he murmured, fully aware that the same words could describe his behavior. But his reasons were undoubtedly more important and much more sensible!

Phil stroked his finished braid one last time, as if making sure it did, he did a good job. And then suddenly he put his hands over the boy's ears and tilted his head back so that he could look down at him. He smiled, in that specific way he always did when he planned to say or do something embarrassing that he himself found adorable. For some reason, he loved to embarrass his kids. He framed and hung up Wilbur's old scribbles in his office, meticulously stockpiled all the cards for Father's Day, and still let the blue glitter-stained cones mar the shelf in the living room, rather than simply tossing them in the bin where they belonged.

He also still wore a bracelet with an unevenly painted stone on his wrist. But that's one thing Techno was able to forgive him.

"I once knew a boy who tried to take his 'stupid stuffed animal' to conquer the world. Without a tent, but with half of our pantry and my flashlight."

Ah, yeah. This one. If an attempt to run away from home becomes a favorite anecdote to tell at the table, it certainly says a lot about the family.

"That's different," he grunted, stepping back, still staying close enough for Phil to know he wasn't really angry. Not at him, anyway. "Because he's so..." He hesitated, looking for the best word. "Everywhere! And noisy! And...!" He waved his hands in extreme frustration. "And it irritates me!"

It took several long, extremely hard seconds for Phil to carefully, apprehensively, put his hand on Techno's back, then shifted it over his shoulder as he circled the chair, crouching in front of the boy.

"Techno, listen." His voice was gentle but firm, and when he looked him squarely in the eye, Techno could have sworn he could see a lot more than he should. "I know you don't like change. I don't think anyone likes it. If you want, I can tell Sam that I won't take any more children in the future."

He said it quite calmly, like something perfectly normal, with no hint of reproach or resentment, with no 'but' to make him feel guilty. Techno was completely unprepared for this.

"Really? He asked through a lump in his throat, though he was absolutely sure of the answer. Because Phil was like that - he would do anything for them, no matter how hard, stupid or painful it might be. Phil was saying, 'Sure I'll change my whole life for you, just ask!' and he smiled and he really, really meant it...

Exactly as he smiled now.

"Yhm. Of course," he nodded, but then he became serious. "But we agreed to take care of Tommy. All of us. I can't just send him back."

Ah. So there was one 'but' after all.

Techno pursed his lips as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"But *why*?" He grunted and just as the words passed through his throat he wanted to grab them and shove them back into his mouth. Anything so he don't have to see the way Phil looked at him, as if for a moment, for a split second, he didn't recognize him at all.

And Techno was also not sure if he wanted to know himself at this point.

Phil sighed heavily, placing a hand on his knee to calm his trembling.

"You know why."

Techno took a deep breath.

"I know," he admitted, wrapping his arms around his shoulders tighter. "I'm just angry. I'm sorry."

The apology changed nothing, certainly didn't take back the words once said, but at the moment he had nothing better to offer. But Phil had always known when he was sincerely regretting something, so after a while his face softened and his eyes gained a little tenderness.

"I know you are. It's alright."

It was not 'alright'. Not really. But it could be, in a few months, when everything is back to normal. Techno was ready to take this vague promise and cling to it.

"Tommy... could he really be the last one?" He made sure, winding a loose strand of hair around his fingers. He felt bad to ask this with so much hope, but not knowing was even worse.

"Of course. I don't want to do anything that makes you uncomfortable." Phil's smile faded a little. "You could have said right away."

Techno stared at his feet, just like then, by the fire.

"I know, but..." He took a deep breath. "Wouldn't that be selfish?"

If it were anyone else, he wouldn't dare to ask. But Phil always took their problems seriously and actually thought about them, rather than trying to dismiss them.

"No, I don't think so," he said now, after a moment's thought. "There's a saying: 'Don't set yourself on fire trying to keep others warm.'"

The boy frowned.

"And what does that mean?"

"That you have to put your own welfare first, even if you really want to help someone. You're under no obligation to care for others if it hurts you in some way."

Oh. Well, it made a lot of sense. Mainly because it was Phil who said it. And it also didn't make sense at all, for exactly the same reason.

Techno didn't dare to look up, clenching his hands tightly on his forearms. His mouth felt suddenly dry and he felt as if some invisible force was squeezing his chest.

"I often say things that hurt you," he whispered, unable to do anything louder.

Phil stared at him in surprise, blinked, then visibly saddened.

"That's different," he assured, reaching for his hands and squeezing it tightly.

Techno hesitated before returning the hug.

"How?"

"Because you're my child and such is the life of a parent, that they have to endure teen's moods." He shrugged, but it was obvious that he wasn't as carefree as he wanted to be. However, if he wanted to say more, he had no chance, because somewhere on the floor the sharp, as if urgent sound of the guitar began to fly away. "Oh. Wilbur is impatient." He stood up, taking a few seconds and very dramatic expressions to stretch his back. "You better go to him. I'll finish washing up."

If Techno was good at something, it was at knowing when it wasn't worth digging down and it was better to just let go.

"Hey Techno?" he heard when he was already in the door and immediately stopped in mid-step. "I love you."

Techno bowed his head, hoping his hair would cover his face, preferably once and for all. But he couldn't help that his ears stung.

"Yhm. I know," he muttered, because he was damn too old to be so open about it. Almost adult and very serious and above all childish sentiments and absolutely unable to just walk away when Phil looked at him like that. Damn it. "I love you too..."

Chapter End Notes

Me: *writing scene at the table to show that Techno is still very immature and childish.*
Also me, every time I come to my parents' house and see my sister sitting in my chair:
...Move.

My sister: But it's my place?

Me: Move.

My sister: You don't even live here anymore!

Me: MOVE OR I'll MAKE YOU!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

@Katricia made this chapter better! Pog! :D

Techno wasn't sure how or when the next two weeks passed. Perhaps because he spent most of his time locked in his room, surrounded by books, hoping that the knowledge contained in them would magically flow into his brain by the way of osmosis. He was generally a good student, not perfect, and certainly not as good as Wilbur, but he did well enough that most teachers would ignore him. There was a good chance he would have been able to take the exams as he stood and still pass, but even if that option seemed tempting at times - especially in the evenings, after a few hours of reading, scratching math formulas, and smacking his forehead on a textbook in a silent gesture of desperation when his eyes stung and he was seconds away from quitting everything - he always changed his mind at the last minute. Sometimes it's because of Wilbur, sticking his head into the room to see if he's already asleep and if he still had enough strength to help him with English. Techno didn't have the strength. But he had a younger brother who was hard to say no to, so he usually made him a place on the bed, where they would then fall asleep next to each other until one of them knocked a pile of books down in his sleep and made a noise.

But for the most part, the last barrier between Techno and the vision to drop out of education was Phil.

"You should rest," he said practically every day, brushing his son's hair back and looking at the scattered textbooks as if the pieces of stitched paper were just waiting to attack his child. "You know I don't like it when you study like this. It's not healthy."

Techno, more focused on slurping than the lecture he had heard a million times before, just shook his head.

"If I don't learn, I won't get a good result," he reminded.

"If you don't stay up late at night, you won't be exhausted." Phil tapped him on the nose. "I see an obvious choice here." He sighed heavily, reaching out to the side to correct the pile of books, plates and cups that might soon collapse, which should have been in the sink yesterday, but somehow stubbornly refused to teleport there. "I don't understand why you both try so hard."

Techno raised an eyebrow.

"Said no parent ever."

"It doesn't have any effect on your grades, you know that?"

Techno knew. Of course he knew, he had spent the good first few years of his education telling teachers that no, he had no intention of wasting time preparing for utterly useless tests. Not when at home his main mission is to survive until the morning, and the only thing the school has to offer him in this regard are the scraps of food that he collected from the trays of other students in the canteen.

But with Phil it was... different. Not that Techno suddenly fell in love with learning (although it was certainly much easier for him when his stomach was full and he wasn't worried about whether it was safe to return home) and sometimes he still didn't quite believe that he could actually achieve something in the future. That he's good enough, wise enough, sufficient at all. But Phil made him want to try. And Techno wanted to hear that he's making progress, he wanted to see that sincere, wide smile when Phil bragged about his good grades, he wanted to show that he was trying too. Even if he didn't always do as well as he wanted.

"You think dad would agree if I wanted to quit school?" Wilbur asked once, a year back, lying on the back of the couch, legs dangling to either side and forearms dramatically over his face. For several hours he had been doing nothing but whining and lying on the furniture, and Techno was slowly building up the urge to knock him off. He understood that his brother liked being infallible when it came to geography, but sometimes he took every mistake way too personally and became absolutely unbearable for the rest of the day.

Somehow, however, Techno managed to suppress the temptation to deliver one well-aimed blow and only looked at him from above the book.

"You can't quit school. It's illegal."

"Really?"

"Yhm. That's what they told me once." He winced at the memory. "But Phil wouldn't let you anyway."

Wilbur made a low grunt.

"Because he doesn't understand how stupid all this is," he muttered, and this time Techno couldn't stand it, so he turned and smacked his leg with a book.

"Because *you're smart*, you moron," he grunted and after a short thought he struck again, just in case. "I mean, in general, you're a terrible idiot. But at school... you know." He shrugged, leaning back against the headrest, immediately feeling a hand lazily stroking his hair. Probably as a silent threat that he really shouldn't try to strike a third time for his own good. "I could quit school."

Wilbur rolled over on his stomach, almost falling on Techno's head.

"If dad wouldn't let me, he wouldn't let you either."

"That's different." He stared at the open book, pretending that he was able to actually focus on the text even though the whole subject didn't make the slightest impression on him. His fingers were trembling slightly, and he quickly gripped them tighter on the cover. "He knows I'm not made for this anyway. He's just too nice to say it."

Wilbur didn't answer, watching him silently with a very strange expression, a mixture of sadness, disbelief and some kind of reproach. Techno tried to ignore it and not to think about it for the rest of the day. Not when he was finishing his homework, or when he was packing his backpack, and certainly not when Phil looked into the room to see if he was asleep and wasn't fooled by even breathing and tightly shut eyes.

"Hey, Techno?" He sat down on the mattress, placing his hand on the boy's back and slowly moving his fingers between his shoulder blades. "I spoke to Wilbur. He's worried about you, you know?"

Techno was silent a moment longer, deluding himself that he might be able to simulate deep sleep after all, but finally he broke down and turned his head so that he could peer over his shoulder.

"Why?"

Phil didn't remove his hand, still drawing little circles across his back.

"Because of what you told him today. About school," he replied, because of course he already knew everything. Sometimes Techno thought that the walls of this house had not only ears but also eyes and a full set of limbs.

He grimaced but, to tell the truth, he couldn't honestly say he was angry. If it were anyone else, he would be furious and deeply betrayed, because no one, absolutely no one liked snitches, and there were at least a few good reasons for that. But telling Phil was... something else. More like calling the police when something bad happens.

When Wilbur got too stressed with the lessons and tests, and stopped eating his lunches altogether, Techno gave him exactly four days to work it out before involving their private peacekeeper. And he didn't feel guilty about it for a second. He wanted to be a good and loyal friend, but most of all he was an older brother and he had to make sure that this idiot didn't hurt himself.

Apparently it also worked the other way around.

"Wilbur wouldn't have dropped out of school," he muttered, though he was quite sure that wasn't the problem. "He was angry because he couldn't find something on the map and then he took offense all day. He's even afraid to skip classes."

Phil's mouth twitched slightly in a weak smile.

"I don't doubt it," he admitted, but then became more serious. "But you know... I wouldn't let you quit school either. I mean..." He hesitated and sighed. "If you ever decide, when you're older and wiser, that's what you want... I don't think I will have much to say about it. But

certainly not because I think you're not 'fit' for it. You're damn smart, Techno, and you're doing really great." He moved his hand a little higher to brush the hair out of the boy's face. "You had a very difficult start, but see how much you have already made up. You can't constantly belittle it."

Techno took a deep, slightly trembling breath, tightening his fingers on the covers.

"I know. But... It sounds like the truth when you say it. But when I try to remember it afterwards, it always feels like you just wanted me to feel better and you don't think so. Or you think so, but- but it's not true at all." He felt his eyes fog up, and he quickly pressed his face into the pillow to hide it. "There's something wrong with me, Phil."

He felt the hand on his head freeze for a moment and he hesitantly lifted his head just in time to see Phil slide off the bed and kneel beside, bending over him.

"Not at all," he said, and there was so much certainty in his voice that if Techno hadn't heard something completely different all the time in his own head, he might even have believed him. "You just think too much sometimes. It happens to everyone."

"But everyone always said that!" He sat up, wrapping his arms around himself. "That I'm stupid, and- and can't do anything right- *Everyone* !"

Phil's face remained impassive.

"I didn't."

Techno gasped in frustration.

"Because you're...! You're different!"

"Yhm. And I'm right."

"But-"

"No."

" *But-!* "

"Nope!" Suddenly, he put his hands over Techno's ears, looking him straight in the eyes. "Only positive thoughts. We don't listen to stupid voices. Especially those who say nasty things, are mean or make you want to eat washing capsules." He slowly slid his hands over his cheeks, smiling slightly. "I'm an adult and you have to listen to me and I'm always right. And I'm saying that you are very, very smart. Got it?"

Techno couldn't argue with him. Not when he wanted so badly to believe that he was actually right.

"Got it..." he muttered uncertainly, and Phil raised his eyebrows.

"And what will you do when there are stupid voices?"

This time the corner of the boy's mouth lifted as well.

"I'll tell them to shut up?" He tried, and was immediately pulled forward, his forehead touching Phil's.

"Exactly. Just like that."

Techno couldn't say that he has since become a master of silencing his own thoughts. In fact, he wasn't particularly good at it. Not even average. But he made up for it with sincere willingness and motivation! Most of the time. Unless he was very angry, or scared, or he thought of something fleetingly, and before he knew it, he could only focus on it, and he couldn't stop, even though he wanted to, and everything in him was screaming and everything was so loud and *Phil, the voices are mean again, please do something...!*

In hindsight, he was a little embarrassed about how often he ran to Phil with any problem. Sometimes it was completely automatic and without any deliberation. He had never had anyone like this in his life before, was never offered help at all, so when he finally realized that he could actually get as much support as he needed and whenever he wanted, he felt almost overwhelmed by it. Experience had taught him that there was nothing forever, and much less for free, and the more Phil seemed to want nothing in return, the more Techno was desperate to give him anything. But he was only thirteen and had absolutely nothing to offer. All he could do was try at least not to embarrass him.

He looked around at the books scattered everywhere. There was no logical reason to keep them all in front and surround himself with them like a wall. But he hated not having something handy, almost as much as he didn't like cleaning - and scattering everything on the floor and spreading it out on a blanket in the center of the 'nest' effectively eliminated both of these problems.

"Maybe I just like to have good grades?" He shrugged, though he knew it was an extremely weak excuse. And Phil knew it as well, because he raised an eyebrow.

"You had a whole year to study," he remarked, and while the words themselves sounded acrid, they had too much warmth to actually offend. "And I see how hard you try. I'm proud of you both now. It's okay if you let go a little at the end. One moment more and you'll turn gray from the stress."

Techno rolled his eyes, biting into his sandwich.

"I'm not going gray," he muttered with his mouth full, completely ignoring the fact that he was getting crumbs in a biology textbook.

Phil made a face of extreme disbelief.

"How can we know?" He muttered, then, quite suddenly, he placed his hands over his ears, tilting his head so he could see it closely. "Oh, look!" He tapped a finger on the top of the head, between the hairline. "I can already see gray hair here!"

Techno let out a hollow grunt before slipping out from under his hand. He didn't mind touch, not really, but he had to keep appearances or else Phil would have completely gotten over his head. Both figuratively and literally.

He looked down at his hair, loose and still damp from bath.

"Tommy still wants to dye his?" He asked, winding a single strand around his fingers.

Recently, he has tried to avoid the child in all possible ways, taking advantage of the fact that no one will blame him for it. Yet somehow, Tommy still showed up in his field of vision far more than he should have. He was the first person Techno saw when he came down to the kitchen in the morning, and the last when the child would burst into his room without knocking, to shout "Goodnight!". He still insisted on having Henry at the dinner table, and if Techno was eating at his place, Tommy would always put weird stuff on the tray of food. Colored sketches, stones, even a lopsided piece of clay that Phil scraped off the table for a good twenty minutes. Apparently, he just couldn't understand that someone might not want his company and he treated any refusal as a challenge and a sign to try harder.

Techno hated that goddamn stubbornness. Almost as much as knowing that the rest of the family had succumbed to his dark magic long ago.

Phil hesitated, frowning.

"He hasn't mentioned anything lately," he replied slowly, staring at him intently. "I think he lost interest." He paused for a moment. "You wouldn't want him to do it?"

Techno wasn't sure what he wanted. He didn't even know why he would even care.

"It's his hair," he said only, dry and with mock indifference. "He can do whatever he wants."

"You know that's not what I'm asking." Phil, of course, wasn't so easily dismissed. But Techno could be as stubborn as possible, and he was ready to prove it.

"It's your home. You make the rules."

"Techno..." It sounded a bit scolding this time, but when the boy looked up with a face that was supposed to be defiant, he saw only sincere concern. "I know you're busy right now and that it all came out a bit unexpectedly and at a bad time. But when it's all over... this, would you please give him a chance? He is a really cute kid."

Techno somehow doubted it. Not because he had specific reasons for it... In fact, he had no reasons whatsoever, and the more he thought about it, the less he understood his own emotions. But Tommy just had something about him that irritated him, which drove him mad and aroused a resentment in him that he couldn't overcome.

Though, in truth, he wasn't trying very hard at all. Maybe if he really did his best, and if he put into it at least half the effort Phil had to put into tolerating his moods...

He grimaced as he set the half-eaten sandwich back on his plate.

"If you say so..." he muttered, then sighed very, very hard, already feeling tired. "I'll see what I can do."

Phil's smile made the whole promise instantly seem a little more worth the cost.

"Thank you." He stroked his hair one more time, and then, taking advantage of the fact that the boy had nowhere to run, he pulled him hard against himself.

Techno hummed with dissatisfaction, which he had to put all his acting skills into, because Phil's arms were a bit too perfect to just hide in them from the rest of the world.

"You can only do this because I'm too tired to get up," he pointed out, but he hugged back.

"Ah. So the studying has some advantages." Phil laughed and kissed his hair before pulling away and picking up the plates and cups. "I'll go see Wilbur." He said, but at exactly the same moment there was a thud from somewhere downstairs, and then a little panicked, 'Nothing happened! It was not me!'. Phil sighed heavily, shaking his head. "As soon as I find out what Tommy's done this time. This child has more energy than you both put together, really."

It was hard to disagree with that one. Especially given that when Techno came down to the lounge for dinner some time later, the boy was in the process of converting the chairs into a parkour track.

"Hey, Techno!" He was glad to see him and immediately pointed his finger towards the kitchen. "Phil's still home!"

For some reason, he liked to announce this fact several times a day, seeming as bewildered as he was delighted. Techno was slowly getting used to it and treated it as a normal part of the day, like a weather forecast. 'Hello everyone, it's going to be unusually sunny tonight, thirty degrees in the shade, a chance of hail, and Phil is still home.'

"Aha," he muttered, but then remembered that he was supposed to be nicer, and tried to summon a little more will to live. "Cool."

Tommy beamed as he hopped from one chair to another.

"I know!"

At times, how easy it was to make him happy was almost depressing. All it took was a little bit of interest and attention for him to become the happiest child in the world. He was delighted every time Wilbur played cards with him, even if Wil was obviously cheating, or when Phil actually listened to his story and inquired for details. He was no longer surprised at the sight of a full refrigerator, but he had gotten into the habit of trying whatever edible he could get his hands on. They came to the point where it was impossible to reach for any fruit, vegetable, or bar and find no traces of teeth on it. At first, Techno was irritated and practiced a small private hunger strike, but over time he joined the rest of the family in passively accepting the new reality.

There was a good chance that the terror would end in a natural way soon, perhaps a bit unpleasantly though. Because Tommy, as it turned out, had considerable gaps not only in the knowledge of proper nutrition. He didn't quite understand the point of using anything but soap (and even that rather occasionally), he reluctantly accepted that he couldn't go three days in a row wearing the same T-shirt, and when one day Phil reminded him to brush his teeth before going to sleep, he looked at him with sincere amazement.

"But why?"

"To keep them clean and healthy."

Tommy wrinkled his nose.

"But my mom says my teeth aren't real, so why waste time on them?"

Phil blinked, then tried to pull himself together.

"Your dentist must adore you," he joked, smiling a little fake.

Tommy rocked on his heels.

"Mom says dentists are for wealthy people who are bored and have nothing to do with money!"

In fact, Techno was more surprised by Phil's surprise than by the mere neglect of hygiene. You'd think he had gone through that stage when he discovered that Wilbur had never been to any mandatory vaccinations, and Techno had seen the doctor exactly once in his life - when Nate picked him up from house number five. Which, by the way, wasn't a particularly pleasant experience. The doctor asked a whole lot of stupid questions, and for far too long she had been examining his hands and back from all sides. She called it "forensic medical examination." Techno called it nosiness for which she should get a kick.

And yet Phil was fucking surprised. He was still smiling, trying to hide it, but no one who had known him for more than a few hours would have fallen for it.

Two days later, Tommy proudly presented everyone the 'Brave Patient' sticker. Phil was much less happy to hear that in a few years the kid would most likely be forced to wear braces. Techno didn't quite understand why he was so worried about it when the boy would be in a completely different house by then, but he decided not to ask.

Tommy, on the other hand, had a million questions as usual, and sometimes he didn't even wait for an answer, asking one after another, gasping intermittently and stuffing more food into his mouth. He still didn't like knives and forks, but with more 'dirty' dishes he started reaching for the spoon, which was a big improvement that happened probably because Phil was rewarding him with sweets for it. A dentist would certainly be delighted.

"I want to go to school too," the boy said, swinging his legs in the air and licking his fingers. A moment earlier, Phil had handed him a napkin, but he had already assembled a boat from it and seemed very pleased with his handiwork.

Wilbur, reclining on the table with his face on his phone, looked up at him with exhausted eyes.

"No, you don't want to, trust me," he assured, and Techno nodded involuntarily.

Tommy looked first at one, then the other, and puffed up his cheeks.

"I want to," he insisted, as if they could actually forbid him. "Tubbo's mom said school is fun. And that we will be in the same class with Tubbo. And it's always fun with Tubbo."

Phil swallowed his tea and slowly, clearly delaying the inevitable, set the mug down on the table.

"Tommy..." He cleared his throat, taking a deeper breath, only to let it out, staring at the child with both sympathy and apprehension. Like at a little kitten sitting on a big ticking bomb.

"You know, your old house is a bit far away. We don't know if Sam will find a new place for you by september, but even so, I think there is very little chance that you will go to the same school as Tubbo. But I'm sure you'll find new friends very quickly and have fun as well, you know?" He added quickly, reaching out to cover the boy's hand.

At first Tommy didn't react. He just sat strangely still and his smile slowly faded from his face.

"So no Tubbo?" He asked, his voice disturbingly high.

Phil squeezed his fingers a little tighter.

"I'm afraid so."

Tommy looked down at his plate for a moment. His lips twitched, but when Techno was afraid he would start crying, he suddenly frowned, straightened, and shook his head.

"No," he said with all the firmness a six-year-old can do. "Tubbo promised. Tubbo promised and we'll be in the same class and we'll be sitting at the desk together." He thought for a moment, then nodded, apparently in agreement with himself. "Yes. As soon as I get back to my mom, it will be like that."

Techno really felt for Phil. Regardless of everything, it was difficult to spread bad news even when the person was not stuck in a state of denial.

"Tommy..." He got up and walked around the table to crouch by the boy's chair. He was still holding one of his hands, the other hand brushing hair from his forehead. "Listen. You're not going back to your mom."

He was clearly trying to sound soft and firm at the same time, but there was some hesitation in his voice, and it wasn't hard to guess why. He was used to reassuring his children that they would never return to any of their previous homes and promising not to let any of their former parents do them any harm. He definitely had no experience with the reverse scenario, explaining that mom would probably never come back, and why it was good news and not the end of the world.

And Tommy wasn't going to make it easy for him.

"I'll be back. She's coming for me," he said, and glanced toward the door as if expecting his mother to actually appear on the threshold any minute now. Techno began to feel really uncomfortable witnessing this conversation. And he was not alone in this, judging from the passion with which Wilbur had begun to pattern his scrambled eggs. "She just has to remember me. When she comes home and sees I'm gone, she'll come right away." He hesitated, and for a moment there was a hint of fear on his face. "And she'll probably be mad that I'm not there..."

Techno was seriously considering if anyone would notice if he tried to discreetly get away from the table. But Tommy was sitting way too close, blocking the only escape route, and crawling under the table would get absolutely everyone's attention. So he limited himself to exchanging glances with Wilbur and tapping his brother's calf with his foot to indicate that at least they were in this together.

Phil, on the other hand, was completely alone on the battlefield, and although he fought bravely, he was clearly losing.

"Your mom couldn't look after you," he explained patiently. "I'm sure she did her best, but sometimes... sometimes it's not enough. Sometimes adults just don't know how to be good parents and children aren't safe with them. Sam didn't talk to you about it?"

Tommy shrugged, completely deaf to his words.

"Sam said I'm here for a while."

"Yes, that's true."

"So I'll go back to my mom later."

Phil blinked a little in surprise. Although, if you think about it, the child was reasoning in a quite logical way. It came to the wrong conclusion, but the direction was correct.

"No, I'm afraid not. But he will find a new home for you, where you will be happy and no one will forget about you."

The boy nodded.

"Happy with my mum."

Phil closed his eyes for a moment.

"Tommy, no." There was desperation in his voice, and it was obvious that he was ready to do anything, as long as the child would finally believe him and not break his heart any longer.

Tommy just puffed up his cheeks.

"So where?"

"I do not know, but-"

"Well, if you do not know, why are you arguing?" He snapped, jumping off the chair, grabbing Henry by the neck and running towards the stairs before anyone had even thought of stopping him. Not that anyone was eager to do so.

Phil was still sitting on the floor for a moment before he got up and sat in Tommy's chair, rubbing his fingers over his eyes. He looked tired and much older than usual, as if the stress was actually making him age. Techno didn't even want to think how much youth he himself had already taken from him.

"You didn't do that bad," he tried to cheer him up, to make it up to him at least a little. "Next time you will succeed..."

Wilbur nodded eagerly.

"If you want, you can practice on me," he offered. "I am always happy to hear that my mother will never come back."

Phil buried face in his hands.

"Wilbur..."

"That *was* funny! You guys just have no sense of humor at all!"

Phil didn't answer, preoccupied with an internal crisis.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Yooo! I made this chapter with @Katricia's help :D

Techno had exactly a million better things to do on the first day of summer vacation than play nanny. At the top, obviously, was spending days in bed, sleeping off the weeks of stress, and letting all the knowledge he had acquired literally drain through his ears and disappear once and for all. Not that he was complaining, not really, he was actually quite pleased with himself, especially when Phil looked at his grades and grinned, immediately pulling him close.

"I'm damn proud of both of you," he assured, pulling Wilbur closer with his other hand and almost crushing them in a firm hug. "I know that you are smart, and yet it always surprises me how much!"

While Techno made a grunt, at least trying to pretend that he didn't like so much tenderness at once, Wilbur clearly didn't mind.

"Remember that the next time you say my idea is stupid and I'll end up in jail because of it," he joked, resting his cheek on his father's shoulder with the most innocent expression in the world.

Tommy, who had been watching them from the couch so far, tilted his head, contemplating something before he climbed onto the backrest and jumped off of it to the floor.

"I want that too!" He demanded, holding up his arms, and Phil's shoulders tightened for a second as he looked at the child in genuine amazement.

The boy from the very beginning was hungry for contact with people and accepted it in absolutely any form, and he never minded physical closeness, and mostly by himself he would grab people by the hand or sit next to them a little closer than he should. But he had never asked for it so directly and with such a need in his eyes. As if he'd just realized everyone was getting something nice and had to make sure they didn't accidentally forget about him.

Techno wasn't stupid. Okay, maybe he was never in exactly the same position, not on the same side, anyway, but he remembered what he felt when Phil hugged him for the first time. Even if the circumstances weren't particularly favorable and they probably could have planned it a bit better, he still kept the memory very carefully and sometimes treated it as a reminder that even if he had screwed up, even if something was his fault, he still had someone who would come running to help him anyway.

And he was pretty sure Phil remembered that moment as well. Maybe a bit differently and maybe with different thoughts and emotions, but he certainly values this memory as much as Techno does. Therefore, Techno couldn't be angry as Phil smiled, just a little nervously, immediately focusing all his attention on the child.

"Sure," he agreed, ruffling his sons' hair before releasing them from his embrace, crouching and spreading his arms wide. "Come here."

Techno couldn't be mad. He couldn't rebuke him, no matter how much he wanted to. Not when he knew perfectly well that the only reason he wasn't hanging around Phil's neck most days was because of his own pride. But he couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy as Tommy immediately jumped into the waiting arms and snuggled tightly into them. And he wasn't even sure for what specific reason.

What he was sure was that Sam was right - the kid was bloody clingy. Once he clung to the victim, there was no way to detach him. Techno realized this almost immediately, from the very way Tommy held his breath for a moment, the way his fingers tightened on Phil's shirt, the way his eyes flashed before he closed them, burying his face in the arms around him. Judging by the look Wilbur sent him, he didn't need any further clues either. Phil, on the other hand, despite raising two boys who were thirsty for a touch like a desert of water, remained absolutely unaware and the sight of his expression when he tried to gently pull the child away from him after a long moment and discovered that he simply couldn't was really priceless.

"Tommy... Can you let me go?" He asked, but got no answer. "Just for a moment, I promise. We'll sit on the couch, what do you say?"

The boy just clung to him even tighter.

"No."

"But we'll be more comfortable there, you know?"

Tommy shook his head.

"I'm comfortable now."

Phil glanced at the blond hair, then at his own hand, which was surprisingly large against the back of the tiny child, and sighed heavily.

"I'll pick you up, okay?" He asked, and waited patiently for Tommy to weigh the pros and cons. It was only when he got permission that he grabbed the boy under his knees and rose with him from the floor. He immediately grimaced. "Christ..." he gasped, sinking down onto the couch as if he had run a marathon. Tommy immediately used his new position to wrap legs around his waist and move even closer. "I swear, all three of you will pay for my chiropractor in my old age."

Wilbur raised his eyebrows.

"In your old age?" He repeated with a little spite. "So are we supposed to start now?"

Phil scowled at him, but didn't answer, immediately focusing on brushing his fingers through the pale hair that tickled his chin.

Techno looked away. He wasn't jealous, absolutely not. What for? That Tommy turned out to be a better kid again? Nicer, more open, more... lovable? One who doesn't hide in corners, isn't always suspicious, has enough confidence in people to want to give them a chance, and doesn't need long months to stop running? That Phil looked damn right, holding him in his arms, that he was so happy and looked at him with such tenderness, as if he had already forgotten that it's only for a moment, that Tommy isn't one of them, he's not a family member, he'll never be...

Techno wasn't jealous. But even if he was, there would be several good reasons for it.

Just like he had more than a few to be cranky after Wilbur forcibly pulled him out of bed and dragged him to the park. Normally he wouldn't mind, he hadn't seen most of his friends for a good week and was starting to miss their stupid antics a bit, but his brother thought it brilliant to get Niki and Dream to bring their younger siblings with them. As if one child at a time wasn't enough. Ranboo at least was good company, but Drista... Drista terrified Techno in a way that only six-year-old girls from wealthy homes can be scary.

"Stop complaining." Wilbur prodded him in the arm so hard he almost lost his balance. He immediately repaid the same, but the resentment remained.

"I'm not complaining," he muttered, his tone definitely complaining.

"You're complaining." His brother leaned a little closer, lowering his voice. "I can hear your thoughts."

Techno pushed his hands harder into his pockets, kicking a stone all the way down the pavement.

"I didn't sign up to be a nanny," he grunted, glancing reluctantly at Tommy, who had been trying hard all the way from the bus stop to the park to run under every passing car. Not that he was much better on the bus. If the windows could be opened, they would probably scrape him off the concrete by now. Wilbur, of course, found it insanely funny.

"Nonsense," he said, grabbing the child by the T-shirt and, at the last moment, completely without any emotions, pulling him away from the curb. Only for the boy to break free from him and run a bit further, waving a stick in all directions. "It'll be fun." He bared his teeth. "We can dig a pit and have them fight."

Techno took a close look at Tommy, his skinny legs to spindly hands, and raised his eyebrows.

"Would you really put him up for any fight?" Not that he didn't want to see the kid get hit, but he wouldn't bet a penny on him. Wilbur might have been prone to gambling, but he was usually smart enough to judge his chances.

"Of course. We trained for this. Tommy!" He called, and the boy stopped fighting his invisible opponent for a moment and turned away, lowering his stick. "What do you do when you have to fight?"

Tommy smiled broadly.

"I bite!"

"What if it doesn't work?"

"I bite more! Harder!"

"Yes! Very good!" Wilbur patted him on the head as if rewarding the puppy with a trick. "We'll make you a champion. And remember, if you have to choose: always bite Dream first."

Tommy nodded eagerly, clearly delighted with the praise, but then hesitated and frowned.

"Which one is Dream?"

"The first who'll mention anything about George."

"Oh. Who's George?"

Wilbur clicked his tongue.

"His boyfriend."

"They're not a couple," Techno said, stepping slightly to the side as Tommy started pumping the air with his stick again. The temptation to offer him a spar was starting to grow disturbingly strong.

Wilbur looked at him in surprise, as if he had suddenly discovered that the water was dry and that planes were big birds after all.

"They're not?"

"No." He shook his head, then, a bit embarrassed, added, "I asked."

"Oh." His brother stared straight ahead as if his whole world was in ruins and he needed to quickly put all its remnants together. "But are you sure?"

Techno was, indeed, sure. Sure that's what Dream had told him. Its credibility was... slightly less sure.

George was 'new' to their neighborhood, and therefore to their group, and had spent the last three months ignoring Dream with the same dedication with which Dream was slowly becoming obsessed with him. Perhaps in part out of sheer shock that there are people who aren't impressed with his LEGO collection and the fact that his last birthday was going to be a trip to Hawaii. Eventually he made it a party in a water park, but only after the parents of all

his friends told him, to put it mildly, to stop being ridiculous. He still didn't seem to understand what was wrong with his original plan, just as he never fully understood that some people spend their entire lives in one country or even one city, and it has nothing to do with the fact that they don't actually want to go anywhere. Techno really wanted to dislike him and it would be really easy, especially at the beginning, when he was still an orphan whose fortune literally fit in one suitcase, but somehow he never managed to do it. Despite all his recklessness and belief that every problem can be solved with money (and that everyone has that money), Dream was... harmless. At times annoying in his detachment from reality, but generally quite lovable and eager to help if he has already managed to process the data and understand that not everyone was lucky enough to be born into a wealthy family.

So while watching him bounce off the wall of indifference for the first time was bloody fun, his sincere despair, and most of all his very loud and bothersome complaining, ultimately got everyone around him to do whatever they could so George would finally agree to give give him a chance and try to befriend him.

Tommy, who had lost interest for a moment as he jumped between the cracks in the pavement, now turned to face them again, clearly confused.

"I thought Dream was a boy," he said, and Wilbur blinked, equally surprised at his surprise.

"Because he is?"

"And George is a boy too?"

"Yhm."

The kids's eyes widened.

"You can be a couple with another boy?" He asked, wincing as he got an affirmative answer.

"But why? Boys are gross."

"You surely are," Techno snorted, grabbing his arm and dragging him towards the park gates. The sooner they get there, the sooner he can throw the kid with the others and pretend he doesn't exist.

Tommy let out a high-pitched screech as he tried to pull away, but Techno only withdrew his hand when he felt his teeth on it. Damn Wilbur and his idiotic games...

"No I'm not!" He sticks out his tongue at him. "I am the only good one!"

Techno decided not to respond. Mainly because he had already seen his friends from afar and instinctively quickened his pace, heading towards them as if towards the promised land after a long walk through the desert.

"Finally!" Sappnap greeted them as soon as they got close enough. He twisted the lighter in his fingers, glancing longingly at the flame before slipping it into his pocket. "Could you be any slower?"

He jumped off the ladder, while prodding Dream, who was sitting on one of the lower rungs, but the latter didn't even look up from his phone.

"George won't reply to me," he complained in a pained voice, tapping the screen furiously, because if someone's ignoring a hundred messages in a row, a hundred and one will surely make them change their mind.

Tommy, a bit shyly hiding behind Techno's legs at first, now made a short "Ah!" and made a jump with excitement.

"Dream!" He pointed at the boy and looked at Wilbur, clearly expecting praise for his perceptiveness and mastery of the difficult art of combining facts. Indeed, he was predisposed to be a master of deduction.

Dream frowned and slowly raised his head.

"Yes?" He looked at the child expectantly, but the boy had already lost interest in him. This time it wasn't entirely the fault of his poor concentration: Sapnap simply decided that it would be a brilliant idea to show him how the lighter works. "What? What did he want?"

Wilbur shrugged.

"Nothing," he said innocently. "He just heard a lot about you."

Dream looked at Tommy, standing on his toes to better see Sapnap running his finger through the thin flame, and suddenly seemed to lose some of his usual confidence. Apparently, like Techno, he had seen all too clearly that six-year-olds were damn dangerous in their inviolability.

"Did you train him to throw himself at me or something?" He asked, hiding the phone in a pocket of a bit too large, but certainly branded sweatshirt. He was slightly shorter, but wider at the shoulders and definitely stronger than Wilbur and could probably pin him to the ground in one move. Not that they ever tested it in practice. The fact that every attack on Wilbur was also a declaration of war on Techno was common knowledge.

Though, in truth, sometimes Wilbur deserved a decent punch.

"Me?" Theatrically, Wilbur put his hand to his heart. "Never!"

"Wilbur, if your brother fucking starts anything..."

"He's not our brother," Techno interjected, not even trying to hide his irritation. He could forgive Phil, who as always meant well, but he would make exceptions for no one else.

Dream seemed surprised, it's hard to judge if it's more for the words or for the aggressive tone, but in the end he just shrugged.

"Whatever," he muttered, glancing at Wilbur as if seeking help from him, but Wilbur just pursed his lips and looked away. "Sure, okay. Sorry."

Tommy tugged on Sapnap's sleeve, trying to pull the lighter closer to his face.

"Can I try?" He asked, and he would probably have gotten what he wanted if Wilbur hadn't grabbed him in time by the nape of his neck, pulling him aside like an unruly cat.

"Nope! Don't you dare", he snapped, which had probably more to do with the fear of Phil's reaction to the information that if he really wanted to, they could bring him the kid's ashes in a bucket, than actual common sense. "Sapnap, take it away, he will try it later and he'll burn our house. Not everyone likes living on the edge, you know? Anyway, where is the rest...?" He looked around and his expression instantly softened, and a smile spread across his lips. "Niki! Niki, hey!"

Techno followed his gaze towards the sandbox where, crouching on its edge, the girl raised her head and waved hello to them. Circling around her, Drista immediately took the opportunity to throw a whole bucket of sand straight at the castle, into whose tower Ranboo was just sticking a stick like a flag on a mast. And that was exactly what it was left with when the entire structure collapsed majestically under a sand storm. The boy stared at the gloomy ruin for a moment before he slowly, almost solemnly, stuck a stick into its tip.

"Wilbur!" Niki brushed the sand off her dress, looked at what a second ago was the building of the century, and with a heavy sigh, she took one child by one hand, the other by the other hand, and pulled them after her. "Hi! You're finally here. Oh!" She paused when she noticed Tommy and smiled, leaning down and reaching out to him in greeting. With her left hand, because Ranboo was squeezing the right one as if he were trying to melt into it. "You must be Tommy, right?"

The boy nodded, still a little hesitant.

"Your hair is pink," he noted, and the girl instinctively lifted a hand to her fringe as if she needed to remember that yes, it actually is. "And Techno's hair too." He wrinkled his nose. "Why is everyone suddenly pink?"

Wilbur nudged his shoulder warningly, but Niki just laughed.

"It's just a very pretty color."

Tommy thought for a moment before nodding slowly, like a world-famous designer graciously embracing a new fashion trend.

"Yes," he decided, shedding his shyness and finally squeezing her hand. "You're pretty too. You can call me-"

"She won't call you 'Big T'." Wilbur slapped him on the back of the head, and got a natural response of a high-pitched screech. "Tommy, this is Ranboo and Drista. Drista and Ranboo, this is Tommy. Well." He clapped his hands, pleased with a job well done. "Now go play and leave us alone."

There was absolutely no indication that his order was going to be carried out. Ranboo continued to hold on to his sister as if his life depended on it. Drista held the pail like a

weapon of mass destruction, ready to use it at any moment. Tommy looked from one to the other before tugging on Wilbur's sleeve.

"Can we fight now?" He asked, a little too loudly to be a whisper.

Wilbur shook his head, leaning over him.

"No, not yet. We must dull their vigilance first."

The child nodded vigorously, accepting the plan without hesitation.

"Phil will kill you for this," Techno said as soon as Wilbur straightened, indecently proud of himself.

His brother just shrugged.

"It's worth it."

* * *

To Techno's surprise, despite the initial reluctance and distance, a few minutes later the children actually forgot about any resistance and started playing as if they had known each other all their lives. It also took little more to come to the only correct conclusion that of all three children, only Ranboo had more than two brain cells. He didn't always know how to make use of them, and he succumbed far too easily to the pressure of the group, but at least you could see a little doubt in his eyes before he did something extremely stupid. Tommy couldn't afford even that much when Drista convinced him to climb up top of the slide, or even when Wilbur and Dream dragged them both down like cats from a tree. And, as with cats, they were received by teeth and claws.

Techno watched it with the pleasant feeling that there was a little justice in the world after all.

"Techno?" He heard from somewhere downstairs, quiet and timid, and when he turned his head, he found a pair of large eyes fixed on him. "Uh... Hey?" Ranboo shifted uneasily, but relaxed a bit when the older boy nodded at him, indicating that he could go ahead. Only then did he pull from behind his back what at first glance looked like a very dirty and strangely white stick. "I have something for you."

Techno hesitated, but, seeing the hope in his eyes, finally decided to take a risk and reached for the unspecified gift, carefully picking it up with two fingers.

"Oh." He blurted out as he realized that he was not holding a stick at all, but a very poorly preserved bone, possibly home to billions of bacteria. "Okay?" He looked at the boy from under a raised eyebrow. "You need... help with the rest of your body? I can bring a shovel."

Ranboo, a little emboldened by his reaction, moved closer and Techno found himself bending his knees to catch up with him a bit.

"I found it in a sandbox. Drista says it's a dinosaur bone and we'll be on TV."

Techno glanced over his shoulder at the slide, where the girl was enacting a Lion King scene on Tommy and, judging by the screams and squeals - not quite with his permission. In fact, there was a high probability that she would appear in the news someday, though probably for a slightly different reason.

"I see. Well, if Drista says so..."

He tried to give the boy back his one-way ticket to a palaeontology career, but he just shook his head.

"You take it," he begged more than ordered, pushing his hand away almost in fear. "I don't want anyone recording me and everyone watching it afterwards. I would feel stupid..."

Techno looked at him, then at the bone, back into the big, pleading eyes, and beginning to regret it, he stuffed the germ cells into his back pocket.

"Okay. When the TV arrives, I'll say you wanted to remain anonymous," he offered, and the boy's face brightened immediately. Techno really didn't want to find it cute. He really, really didn't want to.

As a rule, he wasn't very fond of children. The main reason was that he liked silence, peace of mind, and common sense, and the offspring of his own species contradicted all of these points, and a few more for good measure. But even with all his reluctance, Ranboo somehow managed to find his weak spot and embed himself in it for good. Maybe because he was quite shy and a bit withdrawn, maybe because he usually knew how to take care of himself and didn't require much help... Or maybe Techno was just so damn easy to bribe. Personally, he saw nothing wrong with it - if the kid himself completely willingly brought him some cookies, was he really supposed to refuse with a cold heart? Deny those big pleading eyes and, more importantly, Niki's baking? He could be malicious, but not cruel!

And it's not like he actually had more choice. On average, once a week, Niki would come to visit, dragging a little gremlin with her, which she looked after while her parents were away. Of course, Wilbur didn't have the slightest problem with that, but neither did he play the role of a nanny, and at the first opportunity he shifted this duty to his next victim. Techno was usually the closest one.

After all, he didn't complain that much. Okay, he was complaining. Very much. But mostly for show and reputation.

On the other hand, Wilbur was much more honest with his surprise when, shockingly, he discovered that increasing the number of children not only didn't make them less confusing and manageable, but actually made matters worse.

"Tommy, get off." He waved his hand at the boy as he took advantage of Wilbur's moment of inattention and sat on the swing. "We're busy, go have fun."

Techno, leaning against the railing (there were only two swings, and his brother generously handed one over to Niki and - much less generously - gave himself the other), pondered for a moment whether he should intervene, finally decided that he still didn't care at all.

Tommy shook his head, gripping the chains tightly.

"But now it's my turn!" He protested, waving his legs so that no one would inadvertently dare to come too close. "I want to hang out with you too."

Wilbur sighed loudly, hands on his hips and making a face one-to-one copied from Phil.

"No. Adults talk here. Shoo! And come back when you get older."

Tommy, of course, didn't move every inch. In fact, Techno could have sworn that he actually melted a little bit in the seat.

"No! I want to now!" He insisted, because, apparently, despite having spent almost a month in their house, he still hadn't understood that it was impossible to beat Wilbur with stubbornness. But he was about to catch up on this lesson quickly, for it was less than five seconds when the swing suddenly changed position and the boy almost slid off it to the ground. "Hey! Don't do that!"

Wilbur, lifting the seat up with one hand and swinging the chain with the other, leaned over to look at him.

"Will you come down?"

"No!" Tommy tried to push him away, but he needed both hands to avoid falling into sand as the swing went even higher. "Wil, Wil, I'll fall!"

"That's the point." Wilbur, completely unperturbed, waved the chains once more to the accompaniment of a scream which made everyone's ears bleed, before he grabbed the boy and pulled him forcibly away from the swing. "Shoo! Now!"

Tommy puffed his cheeks and kicked the pile of sand with all his might.

"You're mean!" He shouted, leaning in to get more sand, but changed his mind and jumped back as soon as Wilbur stamped his foot.

Dream, who for a moment had stopped convincing everyone that they needed new phones and should buy them immediately, probably with their own pocket money, grimaced and rolled his eyes.

"Christ. Does everyone in your family have to be so annoying?"

Wilbur turned instantly, giving him a murderous glare.

"Hey. Fuck off, Dream, and leave him alone," he growled, which would have sounded a lot more chivalrous if he hadn't turned to the kid immediately with an equally irritated face. "Tommy, you're annoying. Go away before I do something worse."

Tommy made an even more pained face, one of those that makes adults start to blame everyone around for attempted murder, but because nobody was particularly impressed (except for Niki, who had already tried to interfere for the third time and was ignored), he finally turned and, chin raised high, marched towards the slide.

Wilbur looked very pleased with himself. Dream - a bit less.

"Are you going to have to take him everywhere with you now?" He asked softly so that no one but Techno would hear, and when a shrug replied, he hummed in displeasure. "Couldn't you have gotten some less annoying kid? Or no kid at all?"

Techno grimaced so much that it probably took human facial expressions to the next level. Not because his friend's words upset him or because he didn't agree with them. On the contrary, he agreed in every way. Which was the worst possible option.

He rarely disagreed with Wilbur. He argued with him a million times a day, but not often they had different opinions on topics more serious than what pizza to order. However, they had two very precise rules for such situations.

One: Phil remains absolutely neutral. Dragging him to your side is an extremely shitty move and is forbidden in all countries (except Mexico).

Two: If a dispute cannot be resolved by two, ask Dream for his opinion. The one he'll agree with is in the wrong and must apologize.

Techno didn't feel like apologizing at all. He didn't even think that he did anything bad! But he also couldn't honestly say that he was comfortable with his own feelings. The way that sometimes he just wanted to make Tommy feel bad and he couldn't stand his presence, even when the boy was sitting quietly, busy with his own stuff.

In one of his previous schools, the math teacher was extremely prone to tormenting him. Admittedly, Techno was not entirely innocent, because he was, in fact, saucy, didn't control his anger, and hadn't done his homework even once. But he didn't have the time or energy to do even half of the things she usually blamed him for. He especially remembered that she had once accused him of painting the cupboards in the hallway and refused to undo the punishment even after he proved that he hadn't been to school that day.

"If you were here, you would have done it," she just said, which was so absurd that he couldn't argue. Anyway, the idea of staying after school suited him quite well. The less time at home, the better for him.

But he didn't like the idea that he was apparently treating Tommy in a similar way - down front, through prejudices and with a complete disregard of logic. Because he had made up his mind about it once and didn't want to change it no matter what. Because the moment he met him, when he knew of his existence, he had insisted on hating him and treating him badly.

Because no matter what Phil said and no matter what Wilbur thought, Techno couldn't stop seeing Tommy as a threat and start to see a small, attention-hungry child.

Dream prodded his shoulder, clearly annoyed by the lack of attention.

"Are you listening to me?" He huffed, from above his phone. "I was showing you what George sent me."

Techno closed his eyes, taking a deep, cleansing breath. It didn't help. But at least for a moment he could have been under the illusion that when he opened them again, it would all turn out to be just one long nightmare.

* * *

Everything was, in fact, one long nightmare. From which he still couldn't wake up, doomed to sit at the table, poke noodles with a fork and hear in detail about how Drista tried to bury Ranboo alive in a sandbox.

"She's cool," Tommy said, trying to scoop up spaghetti and not gouge his eye out. In the end, he lost his patience, used his fingers to wind the noodles onto his fork and, very pleased with himself, wiped his hand on the tablecloth. Phil reached for the napkins but then looked at the three paper ships and two planes stacked up against the boy's plate, and finally gave it up. "And Ranboo too. But not as cool as Tubbo," he pointed out quickly, shifting the cutlery to his other hand, apparently testing all possibilities. "Nobody is as cool as Tubbo. Unless it's me." He lost all his patience and threw his fork on the table, crossing his arms. "I don't like that! It's stupid!"

Phil, who had probably expected this to happen from the outset, only smiled with all the patience of the universe.

"You can use a spoon if you want," he suggested, but the child still didn't look happy. A very bold attitude for someone who made a bigger mess around himself than when Wilbur was going through the phase of his fascination with abstract painting. If in any of the previous houses Techno had dared to act like this, he would have eaten from the floor for another week.

"The spoons are stupid." Tommy, not even knowing what bloody undeserved luck he had in life, leaned back in his chair. "But I like knives because you can stab someone!"

Phil's smile faded slightly.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," he asked, which was utterly futile, as Wilbur chose exactly the same moment to demonstrate the capabilities of the other cutlery.

"Hey!" Tommy jumped up, though Techno bet the fork barely brushed his arm. "Wil!" He was stabbed a second time. "Stop it!"

Wilbur continued, shifting his attack onto the kids's belly, starting to tickle him with his other hand. Tommy squeaked, twisting in all directions and trying to escape, but only slumped even lower in his chair and lost access to his own weapon. Phil watched them closely, as amused as he was willing to intervene if the fun escalate into something more serious, but Wilbur was laughing out loud, and Tommy, though he called him stupid five times, didn't seem to have anything against being punctured like a sieve.

Techno pursed his lips as he stabbed his potatoes as fiercely as if a small gremlin would materialize between them and the fork at any moment. He didn't know what and why suddenly irritated him. He wasn't jealous, absolutely not. What about? It's not that Wilbur never acted that way towards him, it was hard for them to have a week without dropping each other off the couch or rolling on the carpet. Not because they were actually angry, it was just the simplest form of closeness that they never had to be ashamed of and that never felt forced.

And maybe that was the problem.

Perhaps he had always optimistically assumed that that was something special between them only, some kind of brotherly bond. Maybe he was actually a bit angry that to Wilbur, apparently, it didn't matter that much. And maybe he felt a little forgotten and spurned, because of course he didn't care deeply about their stupid games and wouldn't join them, thanks a lot, he had his dignity - but how could they know that when they didn't even pay attention to him?

"Boys..." Phil finally decided it was time to intervene when Tommy started kicking the table leg, making the glasses shake. "Come on, calm down."

Wilbur immediately withdrew his hands and Tommy, suddenly unsupported, rolled off his chair to the floor with a soft slap.

"You're stupid!" Was the first sentence he managed to put together when he finally caught his breath and stopped chuckling.

Wilbur grinned broadly.

"I know how to use a fork, unlike you," he remarked, a bit maliciously. Phil shot him a warning look, but nothing indicated that Tommy was more offended than the average six-year-old whose pride had crumbled.

"Piss off! I can do it too!" He bolted, taking the fork in his hand as proof and ramming it into the pasta with gusto, holding his elbow high. "Tubbo taught me."

Wilbur nodded appreciatively.

"And how did you eat before he came to the rescue?"

Tommy didn't seem to sense the trick, as he was still trying to cope with the threading. At the opposite end of the table, Phil was showing him the correct technique, but no one paid the

slightest attention to him. Just like Techno. But that, apparently, was already normal, and he had to get used to it.

"Normally, with your hands."

"Well, it's fortunate that someone started teaching savages."

The boy opened his mouth in indignation, then pressed his lips together tightly and puffed out his cheeks. Which didn't look serious at all, but somehow Wilbur managed to worsen the effect even more by gripping the kid's face tightly in his hands.

"You're a savage yourself!" Tommy pushed his hands away and tried to kick him, causing himself to nearly fall off the chair. "It's just been a long time! I only eat with a fork when I'm with Tubbo, because his parents are watching."

Wilbur looked as if he had a very funny retort ready, but at the last moment he changed his mind and became a little serious.

"Your mom didn't mind?" He asked, still in a relaxed tone, but then exchanged knowing looks with Phil.

Techno began to seriously consider the option that he may have accidentally and unknowingly discovered a way to invisibility. He wondered if anyone would have noticed if he had just gone away. Most likely not.

"Mom was never home." Tommy completely let go of the hard art of using a fork and scooped up food with his hands again, wincing as he burned his fingers. "I'm a big man and I can cook for myself."

"Oh." Wilbur turned in his chair to face the boy. "And what did you usually cook?"

Tommy wiped his mouth on his sleeve and straightened proudly.

"Cereal. And I can make toast too!"

Techno glanced at Phil, but Phil was busy watching the child as intently as if he were scrutinizing his every word and searching for a coded message. Because that's probably what he was doing.

Wilbur's lips twitched, but somehow he managed to keep his face straight.

"Oh, yes, sounds serious. Difficult things." He nodded appreciatively, and Tommy beamed at him.

"Yes. And you have to be careful to cut the bread well, to get out all the gray fluffy stuff." He grimaced. "I ate it once and then I was sick."

Phil frowned.

"Gray fluffy stuff?" He repeated, clearly unsure if he wanted to know the answer.

He didn't want to, judging by the way he looked when Techno mumbled "Mold."

"Oh." He looked at the child, instantly releasing new layers of compassion. "Tommy, you shouldn't be eating old food. Even the 'good' parts. It's very unhealthy," he instructed, and this time not only Techno, but also Wilbur looked at him in disbelief. Phil... had his moments. Or he just really preferred to delude himself for a while longer that the child really considered spoiled food to be an extremely tasty source of protein and vitamins, and that he had any other choice.

Tommy couldn't have known about it yet, but even he seemed genuinely surprised.

"Then what was I supposed to eat?" He asked, and the atmosphere at the table thickened even more if possible.

Phil must have seriously regretted starting the topic, but bravely continued on with all his faith in humanity and naive hope.

"There was nothing else?"

Tommy wrinkled his nose.

"There were cans." He threw up his arms. "But I don't like opening them. I tried once and look!"

He leaned over the table to show Phil his hand, which was smeared with sauce so much that you could barely see the long scar running through the center of his palm.

"Oh." Phil ran his fingers carefully over it, as if checking to make sure it was well healed and not causing the child any pain. "I see..."

"That's nothing." Tommy practically jumped up as he stood in his chair and tugged his shirt up, revealing a large pink burn mark on his left side. "I boiled milk once and the pot fell and it spilled."

Techno winced, but didn't look away. He never had a problem looking at someone else's scars. Not in the way people sometimes expected him to. In September, Dream showed off all the scars that he got from illegal races (with himself, on a neighborhood street, and on a bicycle), but when Techno appeared nearby, he immediately pulled on his sleeve and seemed scared that he had done something wrong.

"Sorry, by the way," he muttered later as they sat together at the table, lazily chewing lunch and making sure Wilbur ate his while summarizing fascinating ant life cycle to Karl. "About the scar thing. I didn't want to... You know."

Techno, to tell you the truth, didn't know. But he nodded and shrugged so that his friend would finally stop looking at him with such uncertainty.

"He probably thought you might get sad. Or that you felt uncomfortable about it," Phil said after hearing the whole story. He was finishing washing the dishes, sleeves rolled up by the

elbows, and just above the water, you could see a thin, pale line on his forearm. "It's nice that he apologized."

Techno frowned.

"He just had an accident. Nobody hurt him or anything, he was just stupid and he doesn't know how to ride."

He leaned in, resting his cheek on the table top, still watching Phil's hands. Then he slowly raised his own forearm to his eye level, letting the sleeve of his sweatshirt slide slightly off his wrist.

"I'm not afraid of scars," he said, as if it were a magic spell to change reality. "Only what they remind me of." He pursed his lips, holding his breath for a moment. "And that someday I'll get a new ones..."

Phil was silent a long moment before he put the cloth down and turned to hug him.

"I won't let anything happen to you," he promised, pulling him close as if he never planned on releasing him again. His hands were wet and cool, but the words were warm and so sincere that Techno didn't hesitate for a second to believe them.

It was nice to feel completely normal for a moment. It was nice knowing someone was able to look at him and not feel embarrassed or disgusted, or even curious in an irritating way, as if he were some extremely ugly exhibit. It was nice to believe that someone didn't find him gross.

Techno really wanted to be able to say the same about himself.

Tommy apparently had no such problems. Perhaps because he was too young to fully understand that he had been hurt, that he should never even be in this situation and be on his own. He seemed utterly unfazed, almost surprised to find it suddenly silent at the table, and, in fact, that was why Techno felt most sorry for him. Because he would understand someday. One day he would wake up with the thought that something bad had happened to him for which there was no explanation, no hidden reason. He will have to live with the thought that the person who should love him most in the world has abandoned him and left him on his own.

Once. But definitely not now, when he was still smiling as he turned his attention to eating.

Phil took a deep breath and held it for a moment.

"That must have hurt a lot," he said finally, quietly and carefully, unsure what reaction to expect.

But Tommy just shrugged, completely unconcerned.

"Very," he admitted, and then, with much more regret, added, "And there was no more milk."

Phil looked as if he were ready to buy and fetch him an entire tank right now. And most likely a herd of cows to match. Luckily for all of them, Wilbur cleared his throat loudly before he could actually do so, drawing the boy's attention to himself.

"Want to hear me play later?" He asked, and the child immediately brightened with excitement.

"And I can also try?"

Wilbur grimaced.

"With those dirty paws? No way. But you can watch," he agreed graciously, ignoring the fact that Tommy immediately started wiping his hands on his T-shirt. "Techno?" He looked at his brother. "You want to come too?"

Techno wanted. If there was anything that could calm him down at that point and help him relax, Wilbur's music was the closest option available. But he was still a little offended, too, and even though he knew it was just a distraction, he felt a little hurt for not being asked first.

"No," he just muttered, more to his plate than to anyone else. But he immediately felt bad about it, so he added quickly. "I'm just... tired."

He knew Wilbur would understand. He got proof of it right away when his brother's foot rubbed against his own in mute support under the table. But when he was lying in bed an hour later, trying not to hear the guitar and the bursts of laughter interrupting it, he couldn't help but feel that he was just missing something. And it was at his own request.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I'm sick (again!) and feeling like shit, so I decided to make Tommy cry, lmao.

Yoooo! Big POG for @Katricia!

The heatwave hit with the start of the week, to the surprise of absolutely no one.

"We're going to die," Wilbur said, ready to cheer others' hearts with his optimism as always. He had pulled an old children's pool out of the garage and somehow managed to locate and tape over most of the largest holes. The water was up to his ears as he lay dramatically in the shade of a tree, legs stretched out on the grass and Tommy literally jumping over his head.

Techno, preferring more proven solutions, decided to melt in his own sweat, spread out on the sun-heated terrace boards.

"I can kill you if you want," he suggested, blindly waving his hand at his brother. Even through his dark glasses he could feel the sun burning his eyes, his sweatshirt sticking to his body with an unpleasant weight and he was absolutely sure he was as red as if he was about to have a stroke. Of course, he could just crawl the few meters to the kitchen and sit in the door of the open refrigerator, but he couldn't bring himself to move even his little finger. Slowly turning into a wet stick wasn't all that bad...

"Do you smell anything?" He heard, and then a shadow fell across his face, standing in the way between him and blindness. He opened his eyes, just in time to see Phil settle an umbrella on the ground, shielding his head. "It's like someone's frying alive..."

Techno rolled his eyes.

"Very funny..."

Phil made a face at him as he crouched down beside him.

"Very." He poked him on the cheek. "Why don't you join Wilbur?"

"Mhm, great plan. If we try really hard, we'll be able to fit our legs in the pool and maybe even leave room for our hands." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tommy trying to jump over the pool, gauging the wrong distance, and nearly landing with his feet on Wilbur's stomach. The hot deck planks suddenly stopped resembling a burned pile and seemed quite a pleasant place. "I'm fine here."

He stretched lazily, letting his sweatshirt roll a little higher over his stomach. He was stubborn, but chose not to lose all his vital organs at once.

"At least you could change. Or I'll bring you a wet towel. You will really hurt yourself if you overheat too much."

He opened his eyes and this time he did indeed look at Phil, long and meaningful.

"It's okay," he muttered, which, of course, convinced absolutely no one. It was probably partly because the sweat was dripping down his neck, partly because he couldn't put his heart into it.

Phil pulled the umbrella closer so that the shadow fell on Techno's shoulders as well.

"Is it because of Tommy?" He made sure, and when he got no answer, he sighed softly, but stroked his son's damp hair. "I can talk to him if you want. I promise he won't ask you anything."

Techno somehow doesn't quite believe it. Not even because he thought Tommy was a malicious little gremlin that existed only to make his life miserable. He wasn't afraid that the child might deliberately want to hurt his feelings, rather that he would become paranoid himself and begin to see the subtext in every word, the mockery in every glance.

"And can you make it so that he doesn't stare?" He asked, but made a mental note in his head to start wearing lighter clothes after all. If not for his own comfort, then for the rest of the family. "I'm gonna come in soon, okay?"

He closed his eyes, pushing his glasses tighter on, so he only heard Phil stand up and open the patio door. Which was... a surprisingly quick surrender for him. Too fast. He was definitely up to something.

What exactly Techno understood less than five minutes later, when he heard footsteps on the terrace again and instinctively looked in that direction.

Phil was standing there, holding the bowl just above Techno's head. His sleeves were rolled up, water was dripping down his forearms, and he was smiling broadly, as innocently as possible.

"Can I?" he asked, gently rocking the bowl. The sun shone through its bottom, casting pale reflections on the terrace, and a few single dots struck softly against the planks, like a threat.

Techno was absolutely sure that even if he wanted to, he wouldn't be able to convincingly protest. Not when the air around him was a good billion degrees, his body even more, and he was sure all the water would evaporate as soon as it touched him. So he just pulled off his glasses and spread his arms wide, squeezing his eyes shut in anticipation.

The water wasn't cold, but on his heated skin, even boiling water would seem like a tide straight from the Arctic. Instinctively, he covered his face, making a short cry, more surprised than actually upset by the cold. He rolled over to his side, brushing his wet hair back from his

forehead, and then looked up, chin twisting almost defiantly. It took a lot of effort not to break and laugh.

"Okay, I'm wet. What now? Gonna throw me in the pool?"

Phil raised his eyebrows.

"That's a pretty good idea. Wil!" He turned towards the yard, simultaneously bending down to grab the boy by the arms. "Come help me!"

"Nooo...!" This time Techno couldn't help laughing, being dragged along the route and kicking in all directions in an attempt to escape. "No way! Wilbur sat in the water, it's already contaminated!"

He finally managed to break out of Phil's grip and sprang to his feet immediately, jumping away. They stared at each other for a moment, one ready to run, the other planning a chase, but before either of them took the first step, Tommy suddenly ran full force at Phil's side, almost knocking him to the ground.

"I want to play too!" He demanded, jumping up and down, producing more energy in a second than many cities used in a year. "Play with me!"

Phil ruffled his hair, clearly as amused as he was touched by his enthusiasm, then looked at his son with equal tenderness.

"It's been a long time since I heard you laughing," he observed, still smiling, but there was a hint of longing in his voice. "I was starting to fear that I was no longer funny."

Techno made a face at him.

"Like you've ever been," he snorted, but then winced as Tommy clearly wasn't going to sit still for a second until he got what he wanted.

"Phiiiiil...!" He complained aloud with such despair as if every second of not being in the spotlight could cost him his life. "Don't ignore meee...!"

Phil just laughed as he crouched down to ruffle his hair.

"A little later, okay?" He asked, and Tommy immediately took a deep breath, probably already getting ready for a very loud and variously squeaky protest. "But!" Phil raised a hand, and the child hesitated, ready to consider the offer. "I'm sure if you ask Wilbur very nicely, he'll definitely play with you."

Techno glanced over his shoulder towards the pool, where his brother had just slumped a little lower under the water, trying to end his miserable life. Babysitting was surely his greatest dream right now.

Tommy must have realized that as well, because he grimaced and shook his head.

"But I want to play with you! It's coolest with you!"

How Phil not only hadn't lost his patience yet, but seemed touched by this childhood loyalty, was to remain a mystery forever.

"Tommy, later. I have to go shopping now. I just need a few things so it will be faster if I go alone."

Tommy grimaced, pushing his lower lip out, but suddenly froze as if struck by some new thought.

"Alone?" He repeated, sincere concern appeared on his face this time.

Phil must have seen it, because although he remained calm, his voice grew much softer.

"You'll stay home with Techno and Wilbur."

Tommy's breathing picked up noticeably as he gripped his hands tightly around his T-shirt. His chest was rising and falling far too abruptly, eyes darting between Phil and Techno before finally lingering on Phil.

"You're leaving?" His voice was so high that, under the thick layer of panic, you could barely make out the words.

Techno hesitated, not sure what to do with himself. On the one hand, he would rather be anywhere else right now, on the other hand, he didn't want to leave Phil. Okay, he was hopeless at comforting people (with the possible exception of Wilbur, but he found comfort in Techno's presence rather than in the clumsy patting on the back and mumbling "it would be fine"), but he still could help! Telepathically transmitting energy or something...

Though that might not have been enough, considering that when Phil put his hands on the boy's shoulders, the child pulled away sharply, looking at him as if he were the worst traitor.

"Tommy, listen." Phil tried again and this time the boy didn't escape his touch. "I'll only be out for a moment. Techno and Wilbur will be with you all the time and I'll be back soon." He started making small circles on his shoulders with his thumbs. "And if you promise to be good, I'll buy some popcorn and tonight we can--"

"No!" Tommy jerked again, this time in the opposite direction, bumping face into Phil's T-shirt and wrapping his arms tightly around his neck. "You can't!"

"Tommy--"

"No! You promised!" He wrapped legs around Phil's waist as well, clinging to him with such despair as if the world was about to end. Because he probably actually believed that's what would happen. "You promised you would always be here! You can't go away!"

Phil looked as if he was trying to remain calm at all costs, and at the same time he was realizing every second that composure wasn't worth the price.

"Tommy, you won't even notice I'm gone and I'll already be back."

"No!"

"I'll just be gone for a moment."

The child's fingers tightened on his shirt. Techno was able to see his face for a moment and was surprised to find that the boy was really crying.

"Mum said that too!" He shouted, and Phil's hands, stroking his back, paused for a moment. "She... She said so and..." He gasped in shallow, quick breaths, but as Phil slid his fingers into his hair, rocking him lightly, he suddenly burst into tears. "Mom said that too! And then she disappeared for a long time and was never there and I was alone! All the time! And then she leaved and she never came back at all! And you won't come back too! And they will come and take me again, and I don't want to-!"

Phil tried to push him away from him, but the child's arms wrapped around him tightly, and there was no sign that that would change.

"Tommy-"

"No! You're to stay!" He repeated, but this time you could feel his resistance starting to wane. As if he accepted the loss and slowly surrendered to the inevitable. "You can hate me if you want to. I don't care," he muttered, resting his forehead on Phil's shoulder and sniffing loudly. "But you have to stay. Please..."

When Techno was seven, he realized that people were always lying. They lie when they say you'll be safe with them. They lie when they say they will take good care of you. They lie when someone asks about bruises. They lie when someone asks about scars. They lie in school, in social services, lie to your face, with no shame. They lie when they promise they can love you, that they already love you and they will never stop...

Phil was the only exception. Phil had always been the exception to all the rules, and Techno loved him more than he could show.

So when Phil hugged the boy tightly without delay, whispering, "Hey, it's okay. I'm not going anywhere, okay? I'll never leave you, I promise," he felt for a moment as if someone had delivered him an exceptionally hard blow.

Because "never" didn't fit with 'for a while'. 'Never' was as damn far from 'not forever' as possible, and Techno hated knowing that at that moment Phil had lied for the first time since he had known him.

Even more he hated the hope that Tommy was the one who had been lied to.

It took a good few minutes for the boy to calm down enough to be able to make contact with him at all, and another long moment before he was convinced that he would really be much more comfortable on the couch.

"You don't have to let me go," Phil said, picking him up carefully. "There's no rush."

Tommy didn't answer, wrapping all his limbs around him even tighter. His shoulders trembled softly, and he continued to snifle loudly, but when he finally lifted his head a little, resting his cheek on Phil's shoulder, he seemed a little calmer. His breathing slowed slowly, catching up with the rhythm of the warm hand caressing his back, his fingers loosened his grip a little, and for a moment, when he closed his eyes, he looked as if he had fallen asleep on Phil's lap, pressed against his chest.

Techno watched him closely from a safe distance, sharing a seat with his brother in the armchair. It felt a little tight, and though Wilbur had changed his clothes, his hair was still wet and his skin cool. Even so, Techno was grateful that he wasn't alone at this point. He would feel a million times more uncomfortable trying to guess on his own whether he should stay or disappear from sight and not force himself into someone else's moment. Even now, he felt as if they were watching something extremely personal that they should never witness.

Tommy twitched suddenly, turning so he could grasp one of Phil's hands in his two.

"Are you mad?" He mumbled and Techno could almost physically feel all the emotions that flashed across Phil's face. He sometimes joked that he was doomed to this question.

Sometimes it didn't sound like a joke at all.

"I'm not," he replied now, letting the boy play with his fingers. "Why would I be?"

Tommy shrugged.

"I don't know," he muttered, but then a little hesitantly added, "Mom was angry when I cried. And then she screamed a lot and wasn't nice at all." He looked up, and for perhaps the first time since he had arrived at their house, he seemed really lost. "You are nice."

Techno couldn't judge whether it was meant to be a statement, a question, or just a hopeful wish. He had a strong suspicion that Tommy didn't know himself. But whatever his intention, he wasn't going to be disappointed in the answer.

"I have no reason not to be." Phil smiled at him, brushing his hair back from his forehead, but then his expression grew serious. "Tommy." He waited a moment for the child to look up. "Why did you think I would hate you?"

His tone was gentle, and he was obviously trying very carefully to choose his words, but to Tommy the question didn't make any impression.

"Mum said so," he just said. As if there was nothing strange about it. Because probably wasn't. Not for him. "And that I ruined her life. And that she would like to take me somewhere and leave me or sell me." He frowned. "Is that why I'm here? Did she really do it?"

He didn't seem surprised or scared by the idea, which, paradoxically, made everyone else feel that way.

Phil hesitated, opened his mouth, closed it, and finally sighed heavily.

"You know..." he began, resting his chin on the kid's head. "People sometimes say a lot of mean things that are not true. Sometimes it's because they get upset, and sometimes... Sometimes they just don't know any better." Techno looked away. Even though he knew Phil didn't mean him, he still felt uncomfortable. "I don't think your mom knew how to be nice."

Tommy wrinkled his nose.

"Will she learn before he comes back for me?" He asked with a gleam of hope.

Phil sighed a second time, even harder than before.

"Tommy." He pushed the boy away just enough to meet his eyes. Which probably didn't make it any easier for him to force himself to take the last of his hope away. "Your mom's not coming back. I'm very sorry." He stroked the kid's cheek, and Tommy immediately clung to his hand more tightly. "But I promise you, we all only want what's best for you. Me and Sam and your future family, too."

Tommy didn't answer right away, staring at Phil from beneath a furrowed brow.

"I already have a family," he said finally, as firmly as indifferently. "She just needs to start remembering about me."

Phil closed his eyes for a moment, but before he had the strength to respond, Wilbur stood up and without a word took his seat beside him, his head on his shoulder and his hand clasped on Tommy's.

"Well, I remember about you all the time," he said, his lips lifting slightly. "Especially when you're jumping over me."

Tommy smiled back, and in a room full of warmth and understanding, Techno suddenly felt very lonely. He knew no one had missed him on purpose, he knew that if he asked, there would be a place for him as well, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to do so.

Some people just say and do mean things, sometimes to others, sometimes to themselves.

And, apparently, he still didn't know any better.

* * *

Tommy didn't leave Phil's side all afternoon. He twirled on the swivel chair when Phil tried to work, handed him the ingredients and drew patterns from spilled flour while he cooked, even huddled under the bathroom door, absolutely unconvinced that even he couldn't squeeze through the bathroom window and run, let alone a grown man. As an exception, Wilbur had given up his seat at the table and exchanged amused glances with Techno as Phil tried to eat and not let go of the boy's hand at the same time.

"Wanna make bets for when he finally can't take it anymore?" He asked in a whisper, leaning over his brother. "I give him a week."

Techno glanced at the bookcase, still scarred by the blue cones.

"Two," he whispered back.

Luckily for Phil, Tommy decided to graciously give him a break in the evening. More specifically, he finally noticed the old framed pictures on the wall of his office.

"Wilbur drew them," Phil explained, and his younger son grimaced and glanced at the colorful pictures as if he was trying to burn them with his eyes. "He used to like art a lot."

"I used to have a very bad taste," Wilbur muttered, but Tommy ignored him completely, staring at the frames as if they were pure gold and worth millions.

"If I draw something for you, will you hang it here too?" He asked, his eyes flashing with excitement that was hard to refuse. Phil, at least, clearly couldn't.

"Of course," he promised very solemnly, and that was how Tommy landed at the table in the living room, surrounded by crayons, felt-tip pens and motivation to create a life's work. Wilbur, caught persuading him to make sure to use lots of glitter, was redeeming the blame by helping him not to cut the tablecloth, and Techno... Techno didn't really have to be here. He didn't really want to be here. But for some reason he was, and it had absolutely nothing to do with his newly acquired fear that if he didn't start looking after Wilbur a little better, he would wake up any moment in reality where he himself will be useless and 'for a moment'.

"Hey, Wilbur?" Tommy put down the crayon for a moment to look at the older boy throwing crushed balls of paper at the target. "Do you have a mom?"

Wilbur froze for a moment before he slowly lowered his next missile, and turned his head towards Techno seated on the couch. They exchanged glances for a moment, frowning and wrinkling noses in their own silent language, but eventually the silence began to get a little too long and too heavy to ignore.

"No," Wilbur replied, still a bit hesitantly. He never had a problem mentioning his parents, but he clearly didn't like the fact that he didn't know where the conversation was going. "My parents died when I was little. And now I only have a dad. I mean Phil." He shrugged. "I don't remember my mom."

"Oh." Tommy, who was just scratching a piece of paper with two felt-tip pens at the same time, 'because that's much faster', didn't even look up. Instead, he bit the tip of his tongue for a moment in concentration, absolutely unconcerned with the change of atmosphere. "At all?"

"At all."

The child looked up at him, tilting his head slightly.

"Hm." He muttered, and apparently somehow managed to keep all his deep thoughts in it, because then he waved his hand and went back to drawing. "Don't worry, you haven't lost

much. Moms are overrated. Though Tubbo's mom is cool. She gave me candy. But mine wasn't cool. And she was always gone. And she yelled at me." He hesitated, then shook his head. "I guess it's better not to have any mom than to have a bad one."

Techno, even sitting a long way away, was able to see all the emotions on his brother's face too accurately. And how ineptly he tries to hide them.

Wilbur pulled his chair a little closer, peering over the child's shoulder.

"Do you hate your mom?" He asked, and Techno almost dropped the book with surprise. Okay, his brother had never been particularly subtle, but also rarely had he been that direct, or even brazen. And the fact that he was trying to imitate the almost indifferent tone of the child didn't help at all.

But Tommy either didn't sense the tension in his voice, or he just didn't quite understand it because he didn't seem the least bit agitated.

"She didn't like me," he said simply, as carelessly as possible. "And I like it more when someone likes me."

Wilbur frowned, but then his face softened.

"But you want to go back to her," he said more than asked, in a strangely soft, tender voice that Techno didn't understand at first. But then Tommy shrugged and said, "She's my mom," as surely, without even a hint of hesitation, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world and... Oh.

Oh.

Techno looked away. He wasn't sure if he was more jealous right now of that sincere, childlike affection he had never felt himself, or if he was more compassionate because it had been abused in an extremely vile way.

Meanwhile, Tommy put down his felt-tip pens, looked at his handiwork critically from all sides again, smeared a little red ink on his cheek, then finally beamed with pride and, clutching the paper in his hand, jumped off the chair.

"Phiiiil!" He called, already racing up the stairs, jumping two steps at a time. "Phil, I'm done! Look!"

Wilbur watched him go, and as soon as the child was out of sight, he pushed back his chair, scuffling it loudly on the floor.

"It's sad," he said as he sat down on the couch next to Techno and almost immediately pulled his knees up to his chin, wrapping his arms around them. His fingers tugged at his trouser legs and he rubbed one foot against the other as he always did when he was worried or stressed. Techno allowed him to do so for a few seconds before grabbing his wrist, partly to make him aware of what he was doing, partly in a slightly awkward attempt to comfort him. Which, by some miracle, must have passed the test, because Wilbur glanced at his fingers,

looked up to meet his eyes, and relaxed a bit. Apparently, he really needed very little to feel safe.

"It's sad," he repeated, this time sounding so free that Techno dared to roll his eyes.

"Really?" He snorted. "Some child in the system has hopeless parents?" He raised his eyebrows. "Tell me more, never heard a story like this."

Wilbur made a face at him, but he was clearly not in the mood for the taunts, because he rested his chin on his knees right after that.

"I know. But... That's different, you know?" He sighed, and Techno pursed his lips, staring at his own socks. "I know you don't miss your parents, but I like... I like to think they loved me. I feel better with it somehow. Even if I have to imagine it myself. And Tommy doesn't even have that." He bit the inside of his cheek. "He knows his mother didn't want him."

Somewhere upstairs you could hear two voices, muffled conversation and loud laughter, so most likely the picture was properly framed and was about to be hung in a place of honor. Techno wasn't sure what would break Phil's heart more afterwards - taking it off the wall when the boy finally went somewhere else, or having to look at it every day with silent longing. He knew there was no third option. Because Phil was just the kind that couldn't keep his distance and remain indifferent. Because Tommy was a little too easy to like, too cheerful, too trusting, and too hungry for warmth. Because although Techno tried to remember that he shouldn't get attached, that he *couldn't* get attached, because Tommy wasn't one of them and would never be, he started to find himself forgetting for very short moments as well.

"You remember he won't be staying here forever, don't you?" He blurted out without a second thought, and okay, maybe it wasn't too subtle, maybe it wasn't delicate, and maybe he didn't choose his words as he should. But the way Wilbur looked at him, the way he seemed outright indignant for a moment and ready to deny him immediately, made it clear that he was right.

He has had many homes in his life and more siblings than he can remember. At some point, he stopped trying to learn new names, stopped recognizing faces, and sometimes he suddenly realized that he had no idea where half of the kids he had to share a cramped bedroom with or rushed to the kitchen for leftovers came from. And if he had met Wilbur then, if they had met each other in worse circumstances, in a worse house, they would have remained indifferent to each other forever. Because Techno didn't play friends. He didn't play brotherhood when at any moment one of them might be sent back, when he himself waited only for a chance to run away and never come back. He didn't play with feelings when no one had ever taught him what they really were.

And while he liked to tell himself that he was just rational and cautious, and he had gotten enough evidence that the more you trusted someone, the more disappointed you'll be, he knew deep down in his heart that he was just scared.

When he arrived at his fifth house, he shared a room for a while with three siblings: two girls younger than himself and their older brother. He never knew their names, the day he appeared was also their last day together, so it's no wonder they cared little for his presence. There was

a new family for the younger two, perhaps permanently, but teens were never a salable commodity and for the most part, all they had to do was wait for the system to finally reject them by itself, leaving them with nothing and on their own.

He remembered lying there at night with the covers pulled over his head, and tried not to hear whispers, muffled sobs, and assurances that everything would be fine, which even to him sounded like a lie, but for some reason were deeply imprinted in his memory. Later, he often thought back to them and imagined that someone was calming him down in such a way, that someone really cares about him and actually tried to help.

He would have given a lot to have someone like that. But he couldn't risk separation.

Except Wilbur didn't care what he wanted and what he didn't. Wilbur didn't give a damn about all his reluctance and all the well-defined boundaries, and even the closed door was no obstacle for him.

"You'll get used to it," he had said, sitting in the corridors. "It's weird in the beginning because you don't know what's going on. But it's gonna be fine."

Techno didn't like the fact that he really wanted to believe him. Or how tightly he clung to those words that he didn't have to whisper by himself for the first time. Or how quickly Wilbur was no longer just another child with whom he had to share space. But by the time he realized what was happening, and how easily he was getting tangled up, it was too late to do anything about it.

Wilbur was his brother. Annoying, stubborn, utterly stupid, and absolutely worth any risk. And he never deserved to suffer. He didn't deserve to lose someone important, to become attached to someone and then watch him go away forever.

And he was very close to that, judging by the way his anger had suddenly drained out of him, and how sad he was when he realized that he was trying to defend a lost cause.

"I know," he muttered, wrapping his arms a little tighter on his legs.

But he didn't really seem to know.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

This chapter is kinda a filler, I needed space and time for some flashback, lol. But I hope it's still funny to read!

I worked at this with @Katricia!

Tommy wasn't like most of the kids Techno had the dubious pleasure of meeting while being thrown from one horrible place to another. He had known it from the very beginning, from the moment the boy, without hesitating a second, squeezed Phil's hand as he let himself be led to a strange place without a little fear, when he ignored the locks on the door and was more concerned with toys than with potential hiding places. He knew this because it took Tommy exactly a week to redo the whole room to his liking, two to rearrange all the furniture and scratch the panels with Wilbur's help, and three to find that jumping from desk to bed might not be the best idea.

"My mom wouldn't care," he said, clearly offended that he had been reprimanded for his brilliant plan and had to help replace the broken bed frame.

Phil, sitting among the scattered pieces of wood, instructions in one hand and a bag of extra screws in the other, only sighed heavily.

"Well, I do," he said dryly, still not in the best mood. Techno would be mad, too, to tell you the truth, if a thud woke him at six-thirty on Sunday. "I won't drive you to the hospital when you fall and break a leg."

Wilbur, who was originally meant to atone for being a bad influence and encouraging wrongdoing, but in practice was more of a distraction than a help, just laughed.

"Of course you will," he said, and while Phil clearly felt like disagreeing, he had a little trouble arguing with the facts.

Techno, the only one sitting in the room of his own free will (though at times he wasn't sure why), looked up from his book just as Tommy took a run and leapt onto the mattress against the wall, bouncing off it and falling down straight on Wilbur's back.

And maybe it was something wrong with him, maybe all those years without a normal home had changed him, but he couldn't help but be irritated by the child's carelessness. That Tommy didn't think for a second before doing something stupid, that he never stopped in the middle of a move, just to make sure he's allowed, that he never looked at the adults' faces for clues or mute threat. That he didn't flinch when someone nearby was too loud, that he didn't

shy away from touch, that he himself clings to people and was more afraid of being left alone than of a stranger.

"He's not weird," Wilbur said as Techno lay on his bed a few hours later, staring at the ceiling, arms firmly pressing the pillow to his chest. "He's just..." he thought for a moment. "Honest."

Techno raised his eyebrows.

"Honest?" He repeated in disbelief, because of all the words in the world, he would never have chosen that particular one himself.

Wilbur was not going to yield.

"Honest," he insisted, sitting down next to his brother and pulling his knees up so he could rest his chin on them. "I don't know- I don't know how to explain this to you. But he... He's doing everything I wanted to do when I got to Phil. I wanted to run after him everywhere and tell stupid jokes and be a bit obnoxious and be able to... hug and everything..." he looked away, his cheeks slightly pink. "But, you know." He shrugged. "I never could before. And I was afraid because I didn't understand why it would be different this time. And I still don't understand, sometimes. When I'm having a bad day. I want to say something or do something, but then I think maybe I shouldn't, because Phil will definitely get angry and suddenly I can't stop thinking about it, even if I know he wouldn't be angry at all, because it's Phil. And in the end I don't do anything because then I feel safe. And at first I thought it was stupid, but Puffy says it's normal."

He walked up the mattress on his knees, lying on his back next to his brother. His right hand landed on the pillow and Techno hesitated for only a second before he covered it with his own. And if he had the feeling that he was the one who needed that little comfort more, no one was ever going to find out about it.

They lay in silence for a long time, on the cool sheets in the middle of the summer heat, listening to the laughter of Tommy running around the yard from outside the window. Techno couldn't say that it irritated him in any way less than a few minutes ago. But he certainly understood that sometimes it's actually safer to keep certain words to yourself.

"There was an experiment like this, you know?" Wilbur said suddenly, rolling to his side. Techno turned his head towards him, and his brother immediately lowered his voice, though there was no real need for it. "I watched a movie about it. They sealed fleas in a jar and covered it to keep them from popping out. And they kept them there for so long that they finally stopped jumping. Like, completely. And even if they took the cover off and fleas could get away, they still didn't jump." He paused for a moment, his fingers clenching a little tighter. "I think if you get hit too many times for not being quiet enough, you end up like that flea, you know?" He whispered, and for a moment, one brief moment, he seemed so lost, so sad and defenseless, as if his world would be limited forever by invisible barriers. Then suddenly he smiled. "I'm glad Tommy can still jump."

Somewhere in the garden there was a splash of water and a child's screeching, probably meaning that the boy had tried to jump over the pool and landed right in it. Techno closed his

eyes, trying to find a similar optimism in himself, to summon at least a minimum of empathy. But all he could see in front of his eyes was a small, very loud flea, leaping higher than he had ever dared to see.

"I think Phil might not be thrilled with this example after today," he muttered, at least trying to lighten the air.

Wilbur chuckled and his eyes flashed.

"Want to hear a secret?" He looked around as if he really expected to find a wiretap before leaning even closer. "I broke that bed. Two days ago." He bared his teeth. "I just taped it together."

If Techno were to point out the most surprising and at the same time goddamn obvious thing he had ever heard... this confession would never have made it into the rankings because he wasn't even the least surprised. After all, it was Wilbur. If Techno had come to him asking for an alibi for a murder case, he would have been given a choice of five on the spot, but when Phil asked who forgot to take out the trash again, Wilbur would suddenly testify against him, even under oath. And he wouldn't feel any more guilty about it, than he did now, smiling broadly, clearly delighted with his own genius.

Somewhere downstairs a door to the terrace opened and laughter was heard, followed by the patter of bare feet on the stairs and the slam of the bathroom door. Techno had no doubts that in a few minutes, when Phil managed to dry the child's hair and get them to change clothes, Tommy would rush into the room, ready to summarize the last hour for them as passionately as if he had at least crossed the Atlantic in a storm. And maybe there would be nothing wrong with that, maybe it would be cute and funny in some way, if Techno didn't feel like with every moment like this, with every fun, with every memory, the boy creeps into their lives more and more, leaving clear traces behind. The room at the end of the corridor was no longer a 'guest room', cows were no longer food, and it was impossible to say the word 'bee' without a household member shouting 'Tubbo like da bee!'. Tommy was becoming part of their daily routine as quickly as he was about to disappear, leaving behind a mass of useless souvenirs.

And Techno didn't need any more of them. He already had too many.

Wilbur must have sensed that the atmosphere had cooled down a bit, or maybe he just actually could read minds sometimes because he suddenly nudged him with his knee.

"Hey, Techno?" He propped himself up on one elbow so that he could look at his brother a little downward. "Just so you know." He shrugged, suddenly looking ashamed. "I like Tommy," he confessed, and then, a little softer, he added, "But you're my brother. And we're stuck with each other, aren't we?"

Down in the living room, right under the stairs, two framed certificates of adoption hung on the wall. Techno remembered that on the first day he'd run a dozen times to make sure they were still there, that it wasn't just one very long dream that someone would wake him from.

"Do you want to check again?" Phil asked that evening, seeing that he wasn't trying to focus on the book at all, let alone falling asleep, instead squirming uneasily under the covers, glancing towards the door.

Techno wanted. And he wasn't a bit surprised Phil had guessed right away. It was even less surprising when he woke up in the middle of the night and tiptoed down the stairs to find Wilbur sitting on the floor in the living room, persistently staring at the frames, although his eyelids were heavy and his head was swaying from side to side.

"They're real, aren't they?" He whispered when Techno sat down next to him. "I'm not delusional or going crazy?"

Techno shook his head.

"Unless we're both crazy, then no," he had said, and then, before he had time to think about it, he added, "I think he would have adopted you sooner if it hadn't been for me."

He had never thought about it before, not so consciously, but when he finally said it out loud, he felt a little better. As if he got rid of some burden and pangs of conscience, the cause of which he could not find before.

Wilbur just yawned widely and rested his head on his shoulder.

"Well, I'm glad he did wait," he replied, tilting his head so that he could look at his brother. "I like being your twin." Techno muttered dissatisfiedly at the term, but made no attempt to protest. Wilbur chuckled. "But I think we're both a little crazy after all."

And maybe they actually were. Maybe Techno still was, because although he had learned so many times not to trust nice words, not to fall for nice-sounding lies, he couldn't help but believe them.

* * *

He believed them a little less as Wilbur, in every way possible, contradicted his own words throughout the following week.

"Here," he said, setting a plate full of crookedly sliced fruit in front of Tommy. "You have to eat it and decide which ones you like, so you finally stop trying everything."

The idea itself was good considering the chance to get rid of the problem of bitten apples in every corner of the house once and for all, and Tommy's eyes lit up in a way that would soften the hardest of hearts, but Techno couldn't help but he felt a slight feeling of jealousy. And then a second, much stronger one, because although Wilbur had assured the boy three times that all the food was for him and that he could eat as much as he wanted, he quickly

forgot about it and began to snack on his own. At first, probably a little unconsciously and out of habit, then only to spite the child.

"Hey!" Tommy leaned over his plate, trying to grab his last piece of banana. "I wanted it!"

Wilbur blinked, making the same innocent face that he always did when he planned something extremely contradictory to it.

"Oh yeah?" He made sure by pretending to put the fruit back on his plate. Then he quickly brought it to his mouth and licked it thoroughly before holding it under the boy's nose. "Here."

"Grooosss!" Tommy pushed his hand away, shouting over Wil's laugh. "Phiii! Wilbur is gross! You're gross!" He repeated, trying to hit Wilbur with the pillow, but Wilbur grabbed it easily and snatched it from his hands.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes!"

Wilbur held up a hand, bending one finger.

"One..."

"You're gross! Gross and stupid and ugly too!"

Wilbur raised his eyebrows.

"Two..."

Tommy finally realized what was happening and immediately lost all confidence and willingness to fight.

"Shit." He jumped up from the couch at the exact moment Wilbur shouted 'three!', immediately grabbing the back of the kid's shirt and dragging him back down onto the mattress.

Tommy's screeching sound must have come close to a pitch that can't be heard by a human ear, and it was almost muffled by the clatter of the plate hitting the floor. The remnants of the fruit landed on the floor, but neither of them paid any attention as they rolled on the mattress, one with the intention of tickling to death, the other trying to puncture a liver with his elbow.

Techno pulled up his legs, pressing harder against the back of the couch, but it wasn't five seconds before he was hit on the shoulder by Tommy's foot.

"Can you be more careful?" He asked, but they both agreed to ignore him unanimously. Or maybe they just forgot he was there at all. It wouldn't be the first time.

Somehow he managed to get off the couch avoiding the swirling limbs, and with a book under his arm, he climbed the stairs only to almost run into Phil on the last step.

"They're still alive," he muttered, anticipating the question. "They're just stupid and making a mess."

Phil visibly relaxed, exhaling slowly.

"I was afraid they're murdering each other," he joked, and if Techno had been in a better mood, he would have answered in a similar tone, because there was nothing so much in common between them as complaining about Wilbur together. But he was as far away from good humor as possible, so he just shrugged and tried to take another step towards the room. "Ah, Techno?" He turned back very reluctantly. "I almost finished the book you gave me."

Immediately he felt a lot better. And maybe also a bit silly for his grumpy face. Because Phil smiled in that sincere, affectionate way that you couldn't pass by indifferently, let alone in anger.

"Oh." He rocked on his heels. "Did you like it?"

Phil hesitated, clearly torn between an honest answer and the need to support his hobby at all costs.

"I have... very strong opinions on it," he finally said. "But give me two more days, maybe the ending will change it."

Techno felt himself smiling involuntarily.

"It won't change. Trust me."

Somehow, despite attracting people like a magnet, Wilbur wasn't able to lure a single person with a minimal interest in reading to their circle of friends. Well, maybe except for Niki, but she had completely different tastes, they could never agree with anything, and to tell the truth, Techno was always so damn embarrassed when he went to talk to her directly. Quackity would probably not be able to sit down with a book even if he were glued to a chair, and as for Sapnap, he was not sure if he could read at all, given how carelessly he always ignored all prohibitions and information about the danger. And Karl would be the perfect candidate if he didn't spend whole days in the company of the two mentioned above.

As for Wilbur himself, while he always loved to wrap himself up in a blanket in the evenings and listen to Phil reading them to sleep, it was clear that the comfort and closeness alone mattered to him, not books themselves.

"I think he got a little discouraged." Phil said when Techno complained to him of a total lack of understanding for his hobby. "He always had to know everything and be the best at everything. He might have forgotten that reading could be fun."

Techno could believe it. Especially looking at the expression Wilbur always made whenever any of the teachers told him that 'he could be better if he put more effort into it'.

"I know I can be better," he muttered one time later, so softly that no one but them would hear. "I could be the best in class. But I'm much happier when I don't have to."

So Techno didn't try to push, accepting that his brother much more prefers to make his own stories than to learn about already written ones. But that way he was the only one in his little, very private library club, and he would be lying if he said that he doesn't feel a little lonely sometimes.

"I can read it if you want," Phil suggested one day as he sat down next to his son on the terrace and nodded at the book in his lap. A bit further away, Wilbur tried to take Schlatt's garden sprinkler and was hit again by the water spray. "You'll have someone to compare your opinions with."

At first reflex and completely without thinking - Techno refused. He had his honor and his dignity, and he knew how to make friends, and if he didn't, it was supposed to be like that. He wasn't five years old, he didn't need his parent's help in organizing his free time. Even if Phil has always been exceptionally good at it. And even if he has always looked so genuinely committed and happy that he can make his children feel better. And even if in his heart, very, very deeply, Techno wanted to know his opinion, he wanted to sit in bed in the evening and talk about books, he wanted to feel important and in the spotlight.

He gave up two days later, leaving the book on the desk in Phil's office, quietly hoping he would figure out the rest for himself. He did. And Techno would be lying if he said that in the last few months he hadn't become attached to this little tradition of theirs.

Besides, the more he thought about it, the more he came to the conclusion that he's the only one who saw any reason for shame. Wilbur certainly wouldn't have such a problem, with his ability to ignore other people's opinions and do exactly what he wanted to do.

"Your dad still does that?" Dream sneered once, after Phil drove them almost to the door on their first day of school, hugged them tightly, and held on as if they were going to war. Which, basically, wasn't that far from the truth. "I would probably die of shame."

Techno had only grimaced, resisting the urge to say something very unpleasant, but Wilbur immediately stopped mid-step.

He stared at his friend for a moment with a stony, cut-throat face before he turned abruptly and ran across the school yard, almost throwing himself into the arms of Phil. He held him tightly for a few seconds before he stepped back and as if nothing had happened, started back toward the entrance.

"Bye! I love you!" He called over his shoulder (Techno had never seen anyone smile as broadly as Phil did at that moment) before he stood in front of Dream, raising his head high.

"Fuck you," he said dryly, narrowing his eyes menacingly. "You don't know shit, so you can take your opinion and stick it in your privileged ass where it belongs."

Dream didn't answer. Maybe because he was temporarily too surprised, or maybe he just didn't quite understand. Techno, at least, had slight problems with that.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He asked his brother moments later as they walked through the crowded corridors towards the classroom.

Wilbur just shrugged, smiling carelessly.

"I have no idea. But my mother used to say that sometimes. And she never said anything nice."

Techno decided not to pursue the topic. He had learned that the less he asked about his brother's former family, the happier both of them were. Though sometimes he was quite baffled by some of the comments.

"We're playing pirates!" Wilbur explained three days ago, caught in a very active contribution to child slavery. "Tommy's the youngest, so he cleans the deck. That's fair, isn't it?"

Phil wasn't any closer to agreeing. Even if Tommy seemed quite content washing the floor in the living room.

"Wilbur, what did I tell you about passing your duties on to others?"

"But he wanted to! I'm a captain, a captain never does things like that! And I even paid him! He got two bars and jelly beans. It's a lot for his low qualifications. It almost causes inflation!"

Phil closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

"I preferred it when you were interested in animals," he sighed, crouching down to get the attention of the child, still splashing water down the panels fiercely. "Tommy, don't believe everything Wilbur tells you. He has golden lips and two very lazy hands."

The boy immediately nodded, looking very serious. Then he took a step towards the couch and tugged on Wilbur's sleeve.

"What does that mean?" He asked in a very lame version of a whisper.

The older boy smiled as he patted him condescendingly on the head.

"Work smart, not hard. Now!" He clapped his hands. "Put some heart into it. My mother always said, 'The floor must be perfectly clean, or you will eat off it!'"

"It's 'so clean you *could* eat off it'," Phil corrected him, but Wilbur just glanced at him over his shoulder, lifting an eyebrow high.

"Maybe in your house."

As always at such moments - no one tried to argue with him further.

Techno, though, sincerely hoped that after some such 'fun' Tommy would finally get smart and stop following Wilbur step by step. But, unfortunately, the kid was extremely stubborn and a lot less clever, so not only was he going to enthusiastically agree to any stupid plan, but every day he seemed to be copying his new, terrible authority more and more. Even worse - the more Tommy clung to Wilbur, the more Wilbur began to like it.

"Tommy, Tommy!" He called, running down the stairs to the living room, where the child had been sitting on the floor for five minutes, enchanted by the magic of a flashing flashlight. Techno had given it to him mostly as a joke so that he would shut his mouth for five seconds, but now he was seriously afraid that he might have actually broken him in the process. "Look! What do you think?"

Reluctantly, Tommy looked away from the flashlight and looked at the paint-smeared wooden sign that Wilbur was brandishing in his face.

"Aha. Mhm." He nodded thoughtfully, then smiled in an extremely passive-aggressive manner. Techno didn't want to point his finger at who he learned it from... "I can't read, Wilbur."

Wilbur took no notice of this remark and merely lifted the plank a little higher.

"L'Manburg," he read proudly, running his hand under the letters for effect.

Sometimes Techno wondered how his brother not only got a positive result on a psychological test, but also got a better opinion than he did. Wilbur was clearly crazy.

Tommy wrinkled his nose.

"What's it?" He asked, because he had no experience yet and didn't know that each subsequent question only sped up the spiral of madness even more.

"This is our country, Tommy. Our own. I just made it!"

Techno leaned over the back of the couch, propping his chin in his hand.

"Is it because Dream has declared the playground his 'kingdom'?" He made sure with what he deserved a contemptuous look.

"I'm not talking to you mr. 'too mature to play'," Wilbur snorted, but his tone softened almost immediately. "But you can help if you want," he suggested, as if graciously making him an offer to live. "We'll have to build a fort. A solid one. And preferably a wall."

"Quackity will be delighted." Techno rose from the mattress, stretching lazily. "And I have more interesting things to do."

"Like what?"

"I'm helping Phil with the harvesting. Potatoes," he added, seeing two faces full of incomprehension. "That green thing that you devastate in your garden every day."

Tommy leaned toward Wilbur.

"Potatoes are interesting?"

"Only if you're a terrible nerd. Ouch!" He grimaced as he was hit by the pillow. "Okay! Go dig those potatoes. But when we win the revolution, don't come crying that you want to get

some nice title!"

Techno couldn't find words to convey how much he didn't care. Just as he could not voice his complete lack of surprise when a few hours later the two boys returned from their 'war' in rather bad moods. He was just halfway through a game on the computer when someone knocked on the door and immediately opened it without waiting for permission. Two pairs of feet scraped sadly against the floor, and Techno sighed inwardly, sliding the headphones around his neck and turning in his chair. Just in time to see Wilbur flop face down very dramatically on the bed, and Tommy eagerly imitating him.

"What happened this time?"

Tommy let out a hollow groan, suspiciously similar to what Techno had to listen to on average twice a day for the past two years.

"Dream's a mean asshole and a wanker."

Wilbur blindly reached for his hair, stroking it lightly.

"Very good," he said, then slapped the fair hair a little harder. "But if dad hears it, we're both dead, so shut up."

Techno pulled his legs up onto a chair.

"If it comforts you," he began, slowly, almost solemnly placing the headphones on the desk, "I had a great time today."

Wilbur made a strange move, as if he wanted to stand up to look at him, but he was out of energy halfway through and instead just snorted:

"Oh yeah, for sure. Digging in the ground. Great fun."

Techno glanced at their muddy hands, most likely leaving marks on the clean sheets, but made no comment.

"At least I was doing something productive," he said, and then, with a little more satisfaction, added, "And I almost beat that idiot next door."

Tommy rolled his face to the side, nudging Wilbur on the elbow.

"Who lives next door?"

"An idiot, I just said," Techno grumbled.

"Some kid who also has his own vegetable garden," Wilbur said at the same moment, in exactly the same tone as always. As if he was a narrator in a nature film and told about the customs of wild tribes. "Techno considers his existence an attempt on his life. He tries to prove to him that he's a better gardener, as if they had so many potatoes that they had to be hauled away by excavators."

Techno crossed his arms.

"I'd have so many, but Phil won't agree."

"He knows which class this kid is going to," Wilbur continued, completely unfazed, "he knows his schedule by heart and can calculate how many potatoes fit in his bucket, but he never remembers his name."

There was too much truth in this to be offended. Techno, indeed, never got interested in its neighbor, not as a living person, and doesn't have enough time to worry about irrelevant details. It was enough for him to recognize him from a distance, in galoshes and a long, purple T-shirt with a large octopus. But without the rake, which Techno absolutely didn't steal from him and absolutely didn't hide very deep in the bushes, where it would decompose within several hundred years and take his secret to his grave.

"All I need to remember are my potatoes." He grunted, wrapping his arms tighter around his shoulders. And then, much, much more quietly, he added, "He's about to lose. He and his octopus too."

"It's a squid," Wilbur corrected him, because of course he had to correct him and spoil even that little pleasure in a competition full of one-sided reluctance. "Hey." He raised his hand and waved it in the air.

Techno frowned.

"What?"

Wilbur repeated the gesture, then, in a slightly clearer sign, patted the mattress beside him.

"Come here," he asked, shifting to make more room, which Techno, hesitating for a moment, took advantage of by lying on his back and letting him throw an arm around his shoulders in a somewhat strange hug. "Better."

"And how did it help you?" He rolled his eyes, though in fact he could actually name a few small parts of life that just got a little better for a moment.

His brother turned to face him; his eyes sparkled and he smiled a little, in the way that always made everyone immediately stop being angry at him. Because Wilbur was just too trusting, too loving and too kind for anyone to want to hurt him.

He was also fucking self-destructive, with his other arm taking Tommy closer to his side and letting the boy nestle his face against his T-shirt.

Sometimes Techno himself wasn't sure if he was really worried about his brother or was simply jealous of him. But both reasons were enough to immediately extinguish the gleam of joy in him.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Little angst time :)

Yooo, bit "Thank you" to @Katricia for beting this!

Also:

CW: Sexual abuse is kinda slightly mentioned? Like, it's just suggested.

Techno should have anticipated this. With how Tommy grew restless in confined places, how he always chose open spaces, how he left the patio door wide open when he retreated home for something, how he asked not to close the bedroom door when he fell asleep. And maybe if he acted differently, maybe if he laughed a little less often, smiled a little less, if he wasn't so loud, then one of them would have noticed something earlier.

Like when Tommy suddenly disappeared in the middle of the day from a house full of people.

"He said I was boring so he was going outside," Wilbur reported, lying on the couch upside down and with his legs stretched up the back. Apparently, the documentary about Venezuela was much more interesting than the missing child. "Probably destroying Techno's chances of being King of the Potatoes or something."

Phil glanced nervously over his shoulder toward the terrace.

"He's not in the yard," he said, frowning, and Wilbur was immediately concerned.

"Maybe he's in the front yard?" He suggested, lifting himself to a position where the blood was flooding his brain a little less. Techno, meanwhile, got up from his armchair without a word and walked towards the stairs to check the rooms upstairs. It had been suspiciously quiet in the house for several minutes when he thought about it. He might not like the kid, but if he got hurt or was sitting scared and crying somewhere in the closet, he didn't deserve to be left without help.

He carefully checked every room, also looking under the beds and in the wardrobes, but there was not even a trace of the boy. His backpack, on the other hand, was tossed disorderly at the foot of the bed, and Henry had a place of honor on the pillow, so running away was out of the list. One threat has been eliminated - a million others left. He came downstairs just as Phil and Wilbur were putting on their shoes.

"You'll go right, to the park, I'll go left. Techno?" Phil turned, his hand on the doorknob, to look at him. "You'll stay in case he comes back. If it shows up, let me know immediately,

okay?"

His voice was firm and sure, but Techno knew him too well not to sense how nervous he was. How he tightened his hand a little tighter on the doorknob to hide its trembling, how he clenched his jaw and tightened his muscles, as though he needed to do anything, act in some way, so as not to sit idle. If it were anyone else, Techno would probably think he was exaggerating a bit. The boy might have been gone for a few minutes at most, and they weren't at all sure that he hadn't hid himself very deep in the laundry basket after all, or had finally found a way to squeeze himself into the washing machine. But he still remembered how desperately Phil had embraced them that night, when they had come home so late and nearly gave him a heart attack. The next day they heard "Phil was looking for you" from most of their friends, and each time the guilt grew a little more overwhelming. They made him waffles for that, as an apology. That is, they made a mess trying to make waffles, but the good intentions were appreciated and sins were finally forgiven.

Just in case, he checked all the rooms, the yard, and even the basement again, though he sincerely doubted that any child would want to venture into it of their own free will. Nobody had tidied it for ages, and most of it was full of old furniture, covered with white sheets, and in winter the wind blew horribly through the window that didn't close. So he wasn't surprised that Tommy didn't find it the perfect playground.

He sat for a good ten minutes on the doorstep, feeling panic and frustration starting to infuse him, before he heard a familiar voice somewhere in the distance. And then another, much louder and squeaky, so he sprang to his feet just to see Wilbur come around the corner, almost literally dragging Tommy behind him. The child was shuffling the ground with his feet, repeatedly trying to pull his wrist out of Wilbur's grip, but probably more on principle than really hoping for any effect.

"I already called dad," Wilbur said as soon as they got close enough, shouting over Tommy's complaining about the outrageous way he was being treated. And a whole tirade about the level of intelligence and beauty of everyone in his sight.

Techno looked at the boy with a raised eyebrow.

"You fucked up," he said, not even trying to find a softer word. He finally understood why Phil had gotten so mad at them then - he wasn't even that panicked himself, and no one had kept him under extreme stress for over two hours, and yet he wanted to smack the kid.

Fortunately for the boy, he didn't get the opportunity to do so.

"Tommy!"

All three turned their heads automatically towards the sound. Phil ran towards them, breathing heavily, looking as if his soul had long since left his body for at least three different reasons.

"Tommy!" He repeated, catching the kid and immediately grabbing him into his arms, lifting him up and pressing him tightly against his chest, as if he was afraid that he might disappear at any moment. The boy gasped in surprise, swung his legs in the air, but eventually, as the

hug became a little less desperate, he returned it with only a slight hesitation. Phil closed his eyes for a moment, hiding his face in gold hair, before setting him down, crouching in front of him. His face was tight and stern, and although his eyes still showed concern, he was definitely not in the best of humor at the moment. "You can't run away like that!" He instructed, placing his hands on the boy's shoulders and squeezing lightly to keep his attention. "You don't even know how much you scared me."

Tommy frowned.

"Why?" He asked, more surprised than scared. Techno admired him a little for that. When Phil looked at him like that, he was ready to plead guilty and apologize.

Phil didn't share his appreciation.

"Because I had no idea where you were," he explained, drawing endless patience from a source he only knew.

"But I said I was going outside!"

"Outside," said Wilbur, rocking on his heels for a long time with an unreadable expression on his face. He was like a slightly distorted copy of Phil, much less forgiving but more inclined to use stronger words to speak to someone's mind. "Like 'to the garden'. Not 'God knows where'."

The boy looked as if he were planning to argue about this level of precision, but he barely had time to open his mouth, Phil squeezing his shoulders lightly once more.

"Tommy." He waited a moment for the child to look at him. "You can't just leave without saying a word. We didn't know where you were. You scared us to death." He slowly pushed his hands lower, squeezing the boy's hands in his, his face softening considerably. "Did something happen? Were you scared of something?"

The boy wrinkled his nose as he lifted his head proudly and stood on tiptoes to seem a little taller.

"No. I'm a big man, I'm not afraid of anything," he announced with all pride of someone who cried two days earlier that he would never fall asleep again after watching a cartoon that was a bit too scary. "And *I said* I was leaving."

Phil looked at him closely, clearly considering whether there was any point in arguing further.

"Next time ask me, okay?" He finally asked, which was a very unfair capitulation, especially since Tommy couldn't even appreciate it.

"But they can go out!" He pouted, pointing at the older boys.

"Techno and Wilbur are older. And they always tell me where they are going and when they'll be back."

"But you let them!"

"I'll let you too," he assured, confusing the child enough to be able to brush his hair back behind his ears and place his hands on his cheeks, making him look into his eyes. "I'm not trying to lock you in, Tommy. But you can't walk around the city without any care."

Tommy puffed his cheeks, but didn't try to back away or even shake Phil's hands away.

"I've always been like this," he only grunted, and Phil winced before he could control his emotions.

"I can imagine."

"Because I'm big!"

"Of course you are." Phil nodded solemnly and the boy closed his mouth, relaxing his shoulders and staring at him in genuine amazement. "You're a big and very smart boy, so you certainly understand that a lot of bad things can happen to you when you're alone. You can fall over and hurt yourself. Or you can get lost and you won't be able to find your way home. Or someone might pick you up and be rude. Or they'll be very, very nice, so you trust them and go somewhere with them."

Tommy lowered his head, staring silently for a long moment at his shoes as he dragged the soles across the sidewalk.

"Mom said that if someone wanted me, she would give me to them right away," he said finally, a bit quieter, and although he didn't seem particularly concerned about the threat, and he probably understood that it was not entirely real, there was a little sense of sorrow in his voice. It worried him in the same way that Wilbur's card tricks delighted him - neither of them were real, but both were meant to seem real and arouse emotions. Techno knew how much it hurt to know that someone has deliberately taken the trouble just to upset you. Sometimes it was worse than the words themselves.

Phil seemed to understand that too. Or maybe he just couldn't remain indifferent to any childhood sorrow. He made small circles around the boy's cheeks with his thumbs before he pulled him firmly against him with one hand, slipping the fingers of the other into his hair.

"I wouldn't let you go," he said, and Tommy paused for a second, holding his breath.

"Really?"

"Mhm." Phil smiled, turning his head so he could kiss the boy's hair. "No matter what."

Tommy's hands gripped his T-shirt tightly.

"But why?"

Phil continued smiling. Even when Techno could have sworn he could hear his heart breaking.

"Because it's my job to look after you and make sure you're safe. And," he added, stepping back a little so he could bop the boy on the nose with his finger, "I like you very, very much."

Tommy blinked, clearly trying not to cry.

"Really?" He made sure, much, much more quietly than usual. Techno wondered if he himself sounded like this before. As if he still believed it was all just a very nice dream and was praying never to wake up again.

Phil nodded, ruffling Tommy's hair, pretending not to see the sidelong rubbing of his eyes with his sleeve.

"Really. So please promise me you won't do that anymore." He waited a moment, when he got no answer, he sighed heavily. "Tommy. You don't like it when I go out somewhere and I don't tell you anything about it, do you? Can we make an agreement that we will always tell each other where we are going? That can be our promise. What do you think?"

The boy shook his head.

"But it's different," he said with such conviction that if he hadn't had red eyes, a scowl on his face, and wasn't at least a meter too short, someone'd probably be able to believe him.

"Because if you go away, you won't come back. And I will."

There was... some logic in it. It had little to do with the facts, but usually during any discussion, Tommy would just yell 'No' and 'You're stupid!' until people gave up. It was nice to see him finally learning to actually use arguments. Even if they were idiotic ones.

Phil sighed a second time, possibly even harder.

"I'll always come back too. We talked about it, right?"

Techno had no idea if that was the case (though he was ready to blindly believe Phil). But he was absolutely sure that it had not brought any major effects so far. Unless, of course, a breakthrough was the fact that recently, after very long negotiations, Phil left the house for a ten-minute walk, still talking to Tommy on the phone. He also got official permission to go to the garage, and the boy actually started checking all the rooms before raising the alarm.

But if you looked at things more objectively, time seemed to be not in their favor at all. The longer Tommy knew Phil, the more he became attached to him, the more frightened he was every time he couldn't find him anywhere around, the more he panicked when Phil had to leave the house, and he still seemed absolutely convinced that at the first occasion he will be abandoned without any notice.

Techno somehow understood him. Understood this strange, completely illogical state of transition that he went through in the past. When he finally began to trust someone besides himself, and immediately realized that it had just made him five times weaker, and that the first major stumble would break him completely. When it finally dawned on him that Phil wasn't pretending, that he was just that kind and caring, and right after that came the thought that the moment he finally broke it would hurt like hell. He was used to being rejected by families that had never earned that name, but the loss of a real home would likely never have been dealt with.

So he didn't say anything as Tommy cried and screamed and made scenes in the middle of the living room just because Phil was out of sight for a few minutes. He didn't comment and didn't try to make fun of him, and maybe, just maybe, he even felt a little sorry for him.

A little. A bit. And he didn't like to think about it.

Eventually, Tommy, very reluctantly and with obvious reluctance, muttered "okay, let it be..." and no one came back to the topic. Though maybe they should. Maybe if Phil had tried to dig a little deeper, if Wilbur had asked a little more, they would have realized sooner that something was still wrong. But Tommy seemed happy and behaved perfectly normal for the rest of the day, running around the house, jumping around the furniture, and bothering everyone, especially when they were busy.

"Hey, go away!" Wilbur waved his hand at him, trying to drive him away like an intrusive fly.

Tommy just smiled innocently.

"No."

"Get out of my room!"

The boy swayed on his heels, keeping his fingertips from accidentally crossing the threshold.

"I'm not in your room," he remarked, which on the one hand was somewhat right, and on the other hand made Wilbur throw himself at him and chase him down the hall, almost killing each other on the stairs. Phil wasn't thrilled when he treated his son's skinned knee. But he didn't say a word, and his gaze noticeably softened whenever he glanced at Tommy's hand, clutching Wilbur's for support and reassurance. In Techno, this picture evoked the opposite feelings, but he also kept his mouth shut.

Either way, Tommy seemed perfectly fine, just as loud and cheerful and absolutely unbearable as ever. Until Saturday morning, when by some miracle and for reasons unknown to anyone, all three of them decided at exactly the same time that now, right now, is the perfect and only time to occupy the bathroom.

"Tommy!" Wilbur banged on the door, which was unnecessary because it was wide open. The boy hunched over the sink, still in his pajamas, tousled hair and a toothbrush in his mouth, looked at him uncomprehendingly. "How long can you sit there? Others want to wash too!"

Techno kept the note to himself that Wilbur really wasn't the right person to say that. Walking into the bathroom after him was like walking through a tropical forest - very wet, very muggy, and you can never be sure if there's no bloodthirsty animal lurking in the bathtub. He had once smuggled a dozen frogs home and tried to start a colony of them, for God knows what reason. Phil picked them up for a good twenty minutes, cursing like never before.

Tommy narrowed his sleepy eyes, clearly thinking intensely over something and analyzing the facts. Then he yawned widely and went back to brushing his teeth as if nothing had happened.

"Tommy!" Wilbur's voice suddenly became a little squeakier, forewarning. Techno really wished he had made popcorn. He was content with a place against the wall with the best view of the coming chaos.

"What?" Tommy finally put the toothbrush down, turning to face the door. He was a little more awake now and was trying to make a menacing face, but the paste smeared on his chin prevented him from doing so. "I was here first!"

"And I don't give a shit!" Wilbur took a step in, grabbing the boy by the collar and trying to pull him out by force. "Time is up, get out!"

Tommy let out a squeal, which must have put the window glass to the test, and clung with both hands to the sink.

"No!"

"Get out!"

The slippery surface wasn't the best point of contact, and it eventually slipped out from under the boy's fingers. Wilbur immediately took advantage of this, catching him up and trying to pull out into the hallway, squeaking and kicking and struggling with his devotion as if his life was at stake. Techno, just in case, stepped back a bit, so as not to be accused of complicity in all the confusion. Although the temptation to bypass both of them and lock himself in the bathroom was huge.

"Phiiiiil!"

"Stop telling on me, you snitch!" Wilbur yelled, then shouted in surprise as Tommy bit into his hand. Instinctively he loosened his grip, and the child swiftly flashed under his arm, pressing his back against the farthest wall of the bathroom.

"Phil, Phil, Phiiiiil!"

Wilbur took a deep breath, and if it were physically possible, smoke would most likely pour out of his ears.

"Fine!" He grabbed the door handle, slamming the door shut so loudly with one tug that the glasses in the kitchen must have shaken. "Then stay here!"

His hand tightened on the doorknob, keeping it level when, naturally, Tommy changed his mind in an instant and wanted to be on the other side.

"Wiiil...! Wil, Wil, that's not funny!"

Wilbur only pressed his shoulder against the door, as if to make sure that it was definitely an impenetrable barrier.

"Now sit there!" He shouted back, almost deafened by the pounding of a pair of children's fists on the wood.

"Wil, please, please, I don't want to!"

"No! Get lost, you're stuck!"

The door at the end of the hall opened and Phil, in his bathrobe and still visibly sleepy, emerged from the room.

"Can you please," he began, in a hoarse, harsh voice, rubbing a hand over his eyes, "postpone these brawls for a late hour?"

"But it's Tommy!" Wilbur said indignantly, pointing accusingly at the door with his free hand. "Do you know how long he was in there? And he didn't want to leave!"

His voice carried down the hall, still raised and full of anger, and Techno suddenly realized there was nothing else to shout over. No squeals, no exhortations, not even a thud.

Phil closed his eyes, probably trying to remember when and why he wanted children at all.

"Wilbur, you're older, please act like you're actually smarter."

"But he-!"

"Sh!" Techno silenced him with one sharp hiss, raising his hand to get attention. They both looked at him and he could point to the moment when they realized that the corridor was suddenly disturbingly quiet.

And then, just as Phil frowned and took a step toward them, a soft, jerky sob came from the bathroom.

Wilbur immediately withdrew his hand from the doorknob, almost as if it had suddenly started to burn him.

"Tommy?" He tried carefully, and when he got no answer, he swallowed nervously. "Hey, you can come out." He tried hard to sound calm, maybe even amused, but he curled up his shoulders and began rubbing one foot against the other. "I'm not... I'm not holding it anymore, so... Tommy?"

He glanced at Phil, and when Phil nodded, he pressed the handle and slowly opened the door. Techno leaned a bit to peer inside, too, and regretted it immediately as his eyes met the child's horrified gaze.

Tommy sat against the far wall, his legs pulled up so high that only a pair of wet, reddened eyes could be seen above his knees. His arms were tucked up, his muscles tense, his chest was rising and falling too quickly, and he was clearly struggling to catch his breath, but his hand was still pressed against his mouth, trying to stifle a cry.

And perhaps this gesture was the worst of it all. Because one thing you could say about Tommy, if he was unhappy for some reason, he could let you know about it, very loudly and very emphatically, and he was never ashamed of either his emotions or his tears. If suddenly he was putting so much effort into staying quiet and not being heard... Techno preferred not

to even think about what was going on in his head. And what Tommy expected when he slowly stood up, propping himself against the wall, shivering and sniffing.

"Tommy..." Techno felt a hand on his shoulder, pushing him slightly aside as Phil took a step towards the child. "Tommy, hey kiddo, what-"

The boy didn't pay the slightest attention to him. His chin trembled, his throat made a squeaky sound, then suddenly he ran towards the door and plunged right into Wilbur's completely unprepared arms.

"I'm sorry!" He sobbed, hugging him around the waist and clutching his T-shirt tightly, as if expecting to be pushed away any moment. Instead, Wilbur's hands rose instinctively and froze just above his back as he stared at the boy, eyes wide in silent shock.

"What..." he gasped, carefully touching the boy's shoulders.

Tommy immediately pressed his face against Wilbur's chest even harder.

"I'm sorry!" He cried for good, gasping for air loudly in large gulps. "I didn't want to! Please don't be angry, I won't do that again, I promise!"

Wilbur looked up, searching for Phil, screaming for help with his whole body, but Phil seemed just as surprised and helpless.

"Tommy..." He crouched next to the boy, trying to get his attention and carefully pull him aside, but Tommy flinched away from his touch.

"Please don't." He tried to hold his breath to calm himself down a bit, which made the words start mixing up, mumbling hastily between one sob and another. "Don't leave me there. I don't want- I'm sorry, I- I'll be good now. Please, I'm sorry, I-..." Wilbur took a step back, trying to weave himself out of his embrace and then... "I'll be quiet now, I promise!"

It took Techno a moment to realize that he was holding his breath, staring at his brother's face, suddenly pale, without even a shadow of color, into his wide-open eyes, his mouth pressed tightly together as if he had never planned to open them again.

Phil cursed softly, once again trying to smooth things over and gently lure Tommy away, but even if he did, he already had a much more serious opponent.

Wilbur's hands tightened on Tommy's shoulders, embracing him so tightly that he squealed, and something in his eyes, some new, strange desperation, betrayed all too clearly that he had no intention of releasing him from his grip.

"Wilbur, hey, hey." Still, Phil shifted enough to catch his son's eye, slowly lifting his hands up to his face. He gently tucked his hair behind his ears, as if testing to see if he could afford more, before placing his palms on his cheeks. "Wil, can you hear me?"

Wilbur shook his head, immediately backing out, instead hiding his face in Tommy's hair. It was hard to judge what the denial was about, but Phil probably decided to assume the worst, because he still held his hands up so the boy could see them.

"Wilbur, it's okay. Nothing bad is happening, I promise. You're safe, Tommy's safe." Wilbur's hands trembled, clutching the boy's back, but neither of them made any sound. "Try to focus on my voice, okay? Can you do that for me?"

This time, after a long second of silence, broken only by fading tears, Wilbur, without looking up, nodded, briefly and quickly, as if he was afraid that he would change his mind at any moment.

Phil smiled, even if no one could see it.

"Great, very good. You're very brave. You both are. Try to sit down now, okay? You can still hold Tommy if you want."

Wilbur sucked in a breath and paused for a moment before slowly, as slowly as his trembling legs and tense muscles allowed him, he slumped to the floor, dragging the younger boy with him, still pressed against his chest. He lifted his face, still frozen in a mixture of shock and absolute terror, and the first tears ran down his cheeks. He closed his eyes, trying to stop them, but Phil was already sitting beside him, putting an arm around him, brushing his hand through his hair, and repeating nice, comforting words over and over again, still in the same calm and warm voice.

He turned his head for a moment and looked straight at Techno, who suddenly realized that at some point, he had no idea when, he had pressed his back against the wall and also slipped down to sit against. He wanted to run away. Lock himself up in his room and not leave until all this was over, until he stops feeling like an intruder, until he stops being so damn ashamed of the fact that he wanted support now too, he wanted a little comfort too, although he wasn't the one who was hurt and others needed it a million times more.

But then Phil mouthed, "Are you okay?" and he reached out to stroke his cheek, and suddenly it didn't matter that this wasn't his moment and not his despair, and it didn't matter if he had cause for shame. He just leaned closer and hid his face in the arm around him to finally feel safe.

Tommy was the first to calm down. His crying gradually turned to shallow, jerky breathing, then to the occasional snuffle and slight hiccups, until he rested his cheek against Wilbur's chest, peering at him from below.

"Wil?" His voice was low, on the verge of a whisper as he reached out and touched the older boy's face. "Wil, are you still angry?"

Wilbur, with forehead still resting on Phil's shoulder, shook his head silently. His arms relaxed, but they were still wrapped around Tommy in a defensive gesture, and he was breathing much more calmly and deeply.

Tommy pulled his sleeve a little more confidently.

"So you won't lock me up anymore?" He made sure, which was a very bad question, and Phil rightly felt it was time to intervene.

"Tommy, Wilbur didn't mean to hurt you. He wasn't mad, not really. He was just fooling around." He took Tommy's hand in his and held it for a moment, smiling as the hug was returned. "Sometimes the fun gets out of hand and \jokes stop being funny, you know?" He hesitated, looking first at one boy, then at the other, clearly trying to judge whether he should be postponing the conversation to another, slightly calmer moment. But Wilbur's hands were still trembling, and Tommy was still staring at them with utter incomprehension, and it was obvious that neither would calm down until the situation was cleared up. Techno squeezed Phil's hand lightly to show his support, and Phil looked at him briefly but with obvious gratitude before he sighed heavily. "Tommy, has anyone... done something like that to you before?"

Although the boy usually had no trouble talking about his family home, and he did so with utter ignorance typical of children, this time he didn't seem so eager to confide.

"Mom said I was annoying," he finally muttered, staring at the floor. He sounded almost embarrassed, and Techno felt his stomach twitch at the thought that he probably really believed those words. "And that I can never be quiet."

Wilbur made a high-pitched, guttural sound, leaning tighter against Phil's side, who immediately stroked his back, rocking him gently. He seemed torn as to which child to focus on, and Techno began to feel guilty that he really didn't know how to help him.

"Did she do that often?" The boy nodded. "For long?"

Tommy winced slightly.

"She left once and didn't come back all day. And it was so hot and I was so thirsty. But then she felt sorry." He frowned. "I think."

Techno clenched his hands into fists so tightly that the nails dug into his palm, leaving pale marks. He wasn't sure why he was suddenly so upset about it, why he was upset about Tommy. The punishment itself was neither particularly original nor even cruel, and he wasn't really the least bit surprised by it. He couldn't be, because if he had counted well, he had probably spent at least half of his short life locked in a room himself. But there was something singularly unpleasant about Tommy's pain, something shocking that, underneath a facade of indifference, made anger begin to build up in Techno.

Maybe because Tommy was still so small, far too young to experience anything similar. Maybe because he wasn't hurt by a stranger, but by what should be the closest person to him. Maybe because even when he believed Wilbur was angry with him and tried to hurt him, he was still more frightened by the vision of rejection.

Or maybe just by looking at him, Techno really realized for the first time that he himself didn't look or feel different at all as he hid under the bed and covered his mouth to stifle crying. When he gritted his teeth and let himself be offended, when he forced himself to call someone who never deserved it "mom", when he heard once again that there was nowhere for him to go, that nobody wanted him, that he was too 'difficult', he causes too many problems, that he would never be loved... He was just as scared and just as lonely, and just as desperately wanted a little warmth and love from the people who should have given it to him.

Once. Before he could convince himself that he was afraid of nothing and didn't need anyone.

And maybe he still couldn't decide if he was more jealous or sympathetic of Tommy keeping those vestiges of innocence.

"I won't do that anymore," Wilbur said suddenly, in a weak, low voice that somehow contained all the determination of the universe. "I'll never do that to you again, I promise." He hugged the boy again, closing him in a firm embrace and hiding his face in his hair. "I promise, really, I didn't want to... I didn't know, I had no idea, Tommy, I'm really, really, so terribly sorry..."

The boy hummed in understanding, reaching out as far as he could to pat the older boy on the shoulder.

"It's okay," he assured him. "Sam said I had a very short memory, you know?"

Wilbur sniffed loudly.

"You literally remember him telling you that."

Tommy tilted his head, blinking quickly and making a comically puzzled face.

"Who said what?"

Techno may not have been the little gremlin's biggest fan. He might not even be at the bottom of that list, but rather somewhere far, far below it. But he appreciated the brief snort and smile on his brother's face.

He wasn't quite sure how much time they'd spent sitting on the floor in their weird little cocoon, when exactly Tommy's cheeks were dry and pale and Wilbur's hands stopped trembling. All he knew was that at one point Phil leaned over him, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"You're gonna take care of your brother, okay?" he asked, and Techno didn't need more encouragement to, with some regret, slide out from under his arm and run downstairs to get blankets from the closet and throw extra pillows on the couch. He was back upstairs just in time to see Phil bend over, trying to pick up Tommy. Wilbur's arms instantly clenched, stopping the boy in an almost defensive gesture. Just afterwards he looked up, met his father's gaze, and immediately withdrew his hands, but Techno wasn't sure what he thought about this reflex anyway. He didn't have time to think too long, because as soon as he brought his brother downstairs, Wilbur immediately buried himself under the blankets and gave no sign of life for a good few minutes. It was only then that he, without a word, put outward his hand, which Techno squeezed tightly and made no plans to let go, even when steady, steady breathing made him realize that Wilbur was asleep.

He didn't wake up until an hour later, in definitely not the best mood.

"I have a headache," he complained to Phil, making a very unhappy face, but his eyes kept darting to the side, towards Tommy, who, now completely calm as if nothing ever happened, watched a movie on a laptop.

So the atmosphere in the house wasn't the best. It was also not the worst, given the circumstances, but Techno would definitely not be angry if someone were to finally remove at least some of the tension. Wilbur didn't speak much, neither during breakfast nor afterwards as he sat in his armchair pretending he was watching a movie, and Phil's anxiety seemed to spread in waves at least a kilometer away. Techno wouldn't be surprised if one of the neighbors came to complain about the sudden symptoms of neurosis and ask them kindly to cheer up.

Not that there were actually great chances for it. Not when Wilbur stared at Tommy for a good five minutes as intensely as if he were training telepathy on him, then he ran upstairs, and after a while returned with an armful of sweets, so far hidden from the world in the third drawer of the desk under his books (from where Techno didn't pick them up regularly, not at all).

"Here." He dropped the entire collection into the child's lap. Behind him, Phil looked up from his laptop, frowning as he listened. "For you."

Like any normal child, Tommy beamed as he started digging through the loot, but almost immediately froze and removed his hands.

"Why?" He asked, clearly looking for the trick.

Wilbur pursed his lips as he looked away, swaying nervously on his heels.

"Because I'm sorry. For what happened. And I want to somehow... make it up to you or something."

Techno exchanged glances with Phil, finding in his eyes an unease equal to his own. Wilbur has never dealt well with guilt. When someone really got upset with him, he would apologize several times despite assurances that everything was okay, and sometimes he just couldn't stop and was willing to do a lot before believing that he really hadn't stopped being loved. Techno once made the mistake of accepting the apology a bit too dry and out of touch, because he was still angry and had no plans to hide it at all. Phil then woke him up at four in the morning, asking him to talk to his brother because he couldn't stop crying.

Tommy couldn't have known about this. He hadn't had a chance to find out about it yet, so he just smiled, a little pugnaciously, lifting his head.

"And now you will do whatever I want?"

The real answer was *yes*. Techno didn't need to read minds to know that. So it was good that Wilbur at least tried to lie. Badly, but still.

"Well... Not *everything*, but..."

"Wilbur." Phil closed his laptop as he slowly rose from the table. "That's enough. Tommy knows you're sorry. Right?"

He looked at the child with a very clear message, but the boy just shrugged.

"Chocolate will help me remember."

"Tommy..."

"What?"

"Nothing." Phil leaned over the back of the couch to ruffle his hair. "We'll talk about it later. Wilbur?" He held out a hand to his son, and his gaze softened. "Can I talk to you...?"

The boy nodded, quickly and almost desperately, taking his hand and letting him lead him up the stairs. Techno followed them with his eyes, trying very hard to contain his deep-seated fear.

Old habits were hard to get rid of at times. Sometimes it was hard not to run, grab Wilbur by the hand, and hide him somewhere where he would be safe. Because if an adult took you away from the rest, it never ended well. Techno has found out about it more than once, and he has heard many, much worse stories.

He remembered the boy he had met at the facility, between one nightmare home and another. He didn't know his name, but they called him 'Purpled' because when he met them, his face was almost purple and swollen. He was scared, ate nothing, and most of the time it was impossible to persuade him to get off the upper bunk of the bunk bed. Techno didn't try to make any contact with him. He wasn't looking for friends or even acquaintances, and he certainly wasn't going to take on other people's problems when he couldn't deal with his own. But it obviously didn't matter. Apparently he was just there just when the boy decided he couldn't hold on anymore.

He remembered lying on the bottom bed, a trembling, tearful whisper coming down from above, and he felt unimaginably dirty just from listening. He remembered looking at his own scars and thought that he was really lucky after all. And he remembered the promise he had made to himself that night to never, ever end up like that. Never allow yourself even a moment of weakness, never become attached to anyone, never trust anyone and never fall for a smile and kind words.

But then Phil showed up and Techno was once again listening to the same wonderful-sounding promises.

And then, for the first time in his life, he saw someone actually trying to keep them.

And now it was about Phil too. Phil wanted to help. He *could* help. Techno trusted him more than anyone else, so he forced himself to relax his shoulders and even his breathing. Everyone was stressed out, the whole day started out horribly, no wonder he had strange things coming to his mind. They needed a moment of peace. Maybe if Phil can deal with the crisis somehow, the three of them could sit on the terrace or watch a movie, or...

"Techno?"

He felt a tug on the sleeve of his sweatshirt and flinched, instinctively pulling his arm back.

Ah, yeah. The *four* of them.

Tommy stared at him with his big eyes.

"Did I do something wrong?"

It was strange to hear him so uncertain and confused. He seemed much smaller then, and Techno could almost understand why Wilbur felt more and more obligated to protect him. Almost.

"Not your fault," he muttered, trying to pretend he was really interested in the TV show after all. "Wilbur... he just does that sometimes."

"Oh." Tommy loosened his grip, taking his hand back, but then he moved so close they almost touched each other. Apparently, he still needed closeness in bulk. "But Phil isn't mad at him, is he? And he won't hurt him?"

This time Techno looked at him, partly surprised, partly not surprised at all. Of course Tommy had to ask about it. Of course he still wasn't sure and he had doubts. He became attached to the new guardian almost immediately, but it seemed that he wasn't particularly picky about it and would accept anyone who paid him a little attention.

"Phil's worried," he explained, fully aware that he himself wouldn't be convinced by that. "Wilbur sometimes... freezes, sort of." He grimaced at his own phrase, but nothing else occurred to him, not when he had no idea how much he could actually tell Tommy. "And he can't stop thinking about... all kinds of bad things. Phil knows how to calm him down." He shrugged, but when he looked at the boy, his uncertain expression and his hands clenched tightly around the edge of his T-shirt, he suddenly felt a surge of some strange tenderness. "Phil would never do anything to him. To either of us."

Tommy didn't really seem to believe him. Techno didn't expect him to at all. But when the boy carefully rested his head against his shoulder a moment later, he didn't pull away or try to shove him away. This day was difficult enough and tiring in itself, there was no need to complicate it even more.

And maybe - but only maybe - he even thought for a moment that it was quite a nice feeling.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I worked at this with @Katricia! Big "Thank you!" for her!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur didn't regain his humor that day. He did come down to dinner, but he played with his food more than he actually ate, and said nothing, just shrugging at every direct question. Immediately after that, he locked himself in his room and didn't show up again. But at least he ate sandwiches, always something.

Techno should theoretically be used to it, somehow immune to remorse and the instinctive thought that it was definitely his fault, that he accidentally did something wrong, that he hurt him, but although he has been in this situation many times, he still didn't know how to deal with it. Usually Wilbur came to him with problems himself. Sometimes right away to talk about it, get rid of bad thoughts and then sit on the bed for a long time, resting his head on his brother's shoulder, slowly quieting down. Sometimes he was too afraid or ashamed to confide in Techno and he struggled with something for a long time before finally daring to ask for help. And sometimes he didn't want to talk at all and would just show up in the middle of the night, tiptoeing down the hall so as not to wake anyone up, then spoiling the whole effect, scooping up the entire duvet and kicking his legs in his sleep. Techno couldn't say it was the most enjoyable form of a wake-up call. But he was definitely not going to complain.

This time, however, there were exactly as many people in his bed as it was intended for, and when he entered the kitchen in the morning, one chair at the table was still empty.

"Wilbur doesn't feel good," Phil explained, feeling Techno's questioning gaze on him. He was smiling reassuringly, everyone could see that he was worried. "I took him his breakfast in his room. But he doesn't really want to talk right now, I guess," he added, and the silent 'with me' sounded too loud.

"I'm making a card for him," Tommy boasted, holding up a half-scabbed sheet of paper. "It's our flag! It was supposed to be only three colors, but I'm out of markers, so it'll have some black as well. Because my card got dirty here and I have to cover it somehow."

Phil smiled as he ruffled the boy's hair.

"It's very nice of you."

Tommy beamed at him as he began to smear the paper as eagerly as if the praise had given him extra strength in his wrist. He seemed to be genuinely committed to his project, and Techno concluded that this time, exceptionally, it didn't irritate him that much. Probably because concern for Wilbur had always acted, in his opinion, like a release card.

Twenty minutes later, when Tommy had finished his life's work, it was acting a little weaker, because he went out to show it off immediately.

"Wiiil!" He knocked loudly on the closed door, hopping from foot to foot over a plate of cold scrambled eggs on the doorstep. Techno wished he would drop his foot right in the middle of it.

"Stop it," he hissed, trying to lower his voice so that he could not be heard from the room. "Give him a break."

Tommy curved his lips, making a sad, heartwarming expression as only a six-year-old can make, with pen marks on his cheek and one sock almost in eggs.

"But he's sad," he noted, and Techno felt a sudden rush of admiration for Phil. If one child could be so frustrating, he preferred not to think about caring for three at once.

"If he doesn't open the door, it means he doesn't want to see anyone."

He grabbed the boy's hand, dragging him to the opposite end of the hall, but Tommy kept turning and looking over his shoulder at the closed door.

"But it's so quiet there," he said sadly. "And he must be lonely..."

Techno slowed his pace a bit, and his grip on Tommy's tiny hand weakened considerably.

"I know," he muttered, trying to ignore the unpleasant twitch in his stomach.

Sometimes, when Wilbur had a bad day, he would spend hours playing guitar practically all the time. He chose the most sad, dramatic songs Techno had ever heard, but with each repetition the melody grew smooth and dull, much as Wilbur built up the energy to pull himself together and leave the room. But it also happened that he couldn't look at his instrument and would hide it under the bed or lock it in a closet. There were times when even something he loved so much only reminded him of painful things, and he had nothing to distract him from his bad thoughts. Techno hated seeing him like that. He hated the silence he couldn't fill, he hated how indifferent his brother was and how much he closed in on himself, he hated that he couldn't help.

So when Tommy broke free from him and ran to the door and squeezed his drawing through the narrow crack above the floor, he didn't try to stop him.

And maybe he even envied him a little that Tommy was still too young to understand.

He himself dared knock on the door an hour later, clutching a cup of tea in his hand as an excuse.

"Hey, Wilbur?" He tried, but wasn't surprised when he got no answer. Disappointed and maybe a bit hurt, but not surprised. "I brought you some tea." He waited a moment, giving any hope, but still not even the faintest sound came from the room. He sighed silently, accepting his defeat, and bent to set the cup on the floor. Somehow, it suddenly didn't feel as hot as it had just moments before. "I'll leave it at the door for you, okay? You don't have to

drink if you don't want to. But I added a little honey 'cause you like it... Maybe a little more than 'a little' because Phil said you'd get diabetes... But I'll leave it anyway, okay?"

He was about to turn when a rattle on the other side of the door stopped him in place. He heard light footsteps, then a door handle creak, and Wilbur's face appeared in the narrow crack. His cheeks were flushed, so he was probably buried deep under the covers, but the shadows under his eyes showed that it had little to do with actually sleeping.

"Hey," he said after a few seconds of silence on both sides. His voice was soft and hoarse, but Techno has never been so pleased to hear it before.

"Hi." He stepped back a little to give his brother more space, but the door didn't open any more. "You want me to hang out with you?" He tried anyway, forcing a smile when he got a silent denial. "I can stay at the door if you want." Wilbur shook his head again. "Oh. Okay. It's okay." It wasn't okay at all. But that's what Phil always said, and Techno didn't really have anyone else to follow. "But you will call me if you need something?"

This time Wilbur winced, his eyes flashing alarmingly.

"I'm sorry you have to worry," he muttered, hastily wiping his eyes and sniffing.

Techno instinctively reached out to him, but then pulled his hands back, unsure if that was a good idea.

"That's okay," he repeated instead, and this time his smile was much more sincere. "That's what we are here for."

When he had a bad day himself and he didn't want to let anyone in, Wilbur would often sit in front of his closed door and tell him about completely unimportant nonsense, or play his favorite songs on the guitar. Mostly it actually helped. Sometimes, on the contrary, Techno would throw the nearest object at the door and shout at his brother until he finally left him alone. Wilbur never got angry or reproached him in any way. And, for some reason, Wilbur still felt it was worth the risk.

Techno was ready to do absolutely anything for him, if only to pay him back. Even if he felt damn bad standing in front of the closed door, listening to his footsteps.

Usually he would spend a lot of time alone anyway, more than once telling Wilbur to piss off and let him read in peace, but now he couldn't find a place for himself, wandering around the house aimlessly. It was weirdly quiet, with no constant arguing or running up the stairs. Even Tommy felt noticeably quiet, most of the time following Phil around as an extra shadow. Except, of course, for those moments when he stubbornly tried to force through a door where no one was waiting for him.

"Wiiil...! What if I promise to be very quiet? I can be super mega quiet!" He insisted, sitting down on the threshold and covering his mouth with his hands, only to break himself in less than a minute. "Wiiil, come on..."

Techno dragged him into the living room by his collar, but he would need a leash and a muzzle to keep him there. Although the small pest would probably bite through both. Every time Techno let him out of sight for a second he would magically teleport upstairs, with even more determination and stubbornness, demanding attention.

"Wil, I brought you sweets! And you can even take my chocolate. But only if you're very sad and you really need to, 'cause I like it, okay?"

Techno couldn't put into words how much he wanted to strangle him on the spot. He would, really, if Phil hadn't picked up the kid this time and taken him into the garden.

"He just wants to help," he said, seeing his older son's expression. "In his own way."

Techno had enough of 'his way'. Especially when, after lunch, he once again found a child at the door, pushing another sheet of paper through a crack above the floor.

"Have you seen the last ones? I drew a flag! And our wall! And I want a sword like that, you can see for yourself." He waited a moment, listening for an answer, and when he didn't get it, he puffed out his cheeks, clearly losing his patience at last. "Wiiil! I... I- I'll start singing to you!" He threatened, and to the horror of the Techno standing on the steps, he actually took in a breath of air. "Do you want to build a snow-"

Fortunately, he didn't have time to sing until the end, because the door suddenly swung wide open and Wilbur grabbed his arm, pulling him inside so violently that the boy almost lost his balance. Techno blinked in complete surprise, but when he took a step forward, the door closed again, leaving him in the hall alone. He put his ear to them, listening, almost expecting that he would witness a murder in a moment and that he would have to find a suitable place to hide the body. But inside there was only Tommy's voice, loud as ever, and when Wilbur also spoke after a while, he seemed strangely calm and as far as possible from wanting to shed blood.

Techno slowly stepped back, staring at the door for a moment longer, still expecting it to open any moment and Tommy would be thrown out in exactly the same way he got inside. But nothing like that happened. The two voices turned into whispers too soft to make out individual words, even if he really wanted to, and slowly began to realize that the child, by some miracle, had finally gotten his way.

He wasn't sure what he thought about it. He couldn't tell if he was more surprised, happy that Wilbur had let in at least one person, or angry and hurt that of all the people in the world, of the billions of people on the planet, it had to be Tommy. Tommy! And not him...

He tried not to think of it that way. His brother was clearly starting to slowly come back to himself, and that was what he wanted, right? It was about making him feel good, making him happy, not some strange inner need to be the one person who can comfort him and understand him and who he trusts even when he stops trusting himself. He was thinking about Wilbur, not himself, really, and he wasn't selfish at all, and he didn't do it at all just to feel important and needed and capable of something other than telling other people terrible things for once. He just wanted his brother to smile again.

So why was he so fucking jealous? Why was he still hoping it wouldn't work out and Tommy was going to be thrown out the door at any moment? And why was he so disappointed and hurt when he knocked on the door himself half an hour later and a child's voice invited him in?

Tommy sat on the bed, using the book as a pad and scribbling furiously. He was smiling broadly, holding a piece of chocolate in his free hand, and even held it out invitingly, wanting to share. Techno couldn't care less. Not when Wilbur was lying next to him, curled around the child like a cat, arms around his waist, holding him close to his chest, rising steadily in steady, sleepy breaths. And he looked so calm, so relaxed, so confident in his safety...

Techno had to leave. He had to get out of there, now, immediately, he had to cool down, he had to find some way to calm down, to somehow silence all the bad thoughts, all the voices screaming one over the other that he had just ceased to be needed, had just been replaced, that everyone finally started to realize how useless he is, how many problems he causes, how unprofitable it is to keep him in the family, and that it's only a matter of time before-

"Phil..." He had no idea at what point he opened the office door, nor did he know why his voice was trembling so much and making it so hard to breathe. "Phil, the voices are mean. Help."

He didn't have to say anything else before he was pulled into a tight hug, then led into the bedroom and sat on the bed, where he immediately pulled his knees up high against his forehead. And maybe it would even be stupid to him how little it took to break him, after he repeated over and over that he was already an adult and didn't need such care, neither warm hands combing his hair, nor soothing words whispered in his ear, nor strong arms in which he could finally feel safe. But somehow he couldn't be ashamed of it.

"What are they saying?" Phil asked, resting his chin on his head, rocking him gently.

It took Techno a good few seconds to calm down my breath and actually find the right words.

"That- that I'm terrible," he stammered, clutching his pants tightly. "And that I only think about myself. And..." He sniffed loudly, hesitating, but then Phil covered his hand with his, and the green pebble on his wrist glowed slightly in the pale light. "And that if I tell you about it, then... you'll start to think that too, and you won't want me anymore."

Phil hummed in understanding as he slowly pulled away, and for a second Techno was afraid that he was right after all, that he did something wrong and would be left alone now. But then he felt hands on his cheeks and hesitantly lifted his head, letting his tears be wiped away.

"That's a lot of lies at once."

He felt he was going to cry again.

"Yhm..."

Phil leaned in to kiss his forehead.

"It's good that you're very smart and don't believe in them at all." He smiled, and even though his eyes had more concern and anxiety, Techno had no doubt that he was speaking completely honestly. "You wanna say what happened?"

Techno didn't want to. But he was also absolutely sure that if he didn't, it would bother him, and he would spend at least a few nights tormenting himself over and over and over and over again before finally breaking down and ending up in the exact same place, maybe just a little closer to hysteria. Of the two bad things, he chose to spare himself.

"Wilbur let Tommy in," he said, and then winced, because even to his own ears it sounded extremely pathetic. "And... And I think he's better now."

Phil frowned as he waited for some more, and when he didn't get one, he slowly nodded.

"That's good," he said, and even though Techno knew they weren't thinking about the same thing right now, somewhere very, very deep in his heart, he felt bloody hurt.

"Yes, but..." Damn, why was he acting so pathetic, why *was* he so pathetic...? "But he didn't want *me*."

It took Phil a moment to understand, and it was possible to pinpoint the moment precisely, because he was clearly sad and his arms tightened a little tighter.

"Oh."

He didn't have to say any more. Even without a word, Techno could sense the compassion emanating from him, that strange, sorry kind of understanding where anyone a million times more would prefer to remain completely ignorant.

"Is this how you always feel?" He asked, shifting a little in his embrace so he could rest his temple on his shoulder. "When we don't want to talk to you about something?"

Phil took a deep breath and was silent for a moment before exhaling slowly, as if accepting some internal defeat.

"Sometimes," he admitted, and sighed again. "Sometimes I do."

Techno wasn't sure if it was all right, to be glad that at least he wasn't the only one with a similar problem. But he couldn't help but feel relieved.

"So... You don't think it's, you know," He shrugged. "Selfish or something?"

Phil's hand was still lightly squeezing his own, and Techno used it to run his fingers along the green pebble on his wrist. The strings of the bracelets from time to time frayed from constant wearing and broke, so he regularly replaced them with new ones. Now they were starting to rub in places as well, and he could probably get on with it right away, but somehow he never knew how to propose it on his own. Maybe he was still too scared to hear that it wouldn't be needed anymore, and the bracelet would end up somewhere at the bottom of a drawer, or it would go straight to the trash.

Phil watched his finger movements for a moment before resting his cheek on the top of his head.

"I think that's perfectly normal," he said finally. "We want to help. And sometimes it's difficult to accept that our good intentions are not enough. And it's easy to feel hurt and rejected."

Techno winced involuntarily.

"I'm worried about him, too," he assured, as if someone were accusing him of not caring enough. "And I know him better than Tommy. He... He can't even keep quiet! And he was imposing himself terribly! And he doesn't understand anything at all!" He clenched his hands, tilting his head lower, almost touching his forehead to his knees. "So why..."

Perhaps complaining to Phil was not entirely fair, not when both him and Wilbur had more or less consciously made him feel that there were topics they weren't ready to talk about in front of him, that there would always be secrets that he would not be admitted to. That even if they love him and are grateful to him for everything he has done for them, some kind of bond can only exist between them. But Techno has never had a particularly large choice when it comes to the people he trusted and was ready to open up to.

And Phil had never refused to help him, even if he himself believed that he did not deserve it.

Nor had he called him a hypocrite just now, or made excuses to him, or told him that at least he finally felt what it felt like to be rejected that way. He just held Techno tight, soothingly stroking his hand again and again.

"Hey Techno?" He said finally. "If in winter we both gave Wilbur a scarf and he chose the one from me, would you be upset?"

The boy frowned, a bit puzzled.

"I don't know," he muttered, wiping his nose with his sleeve. "Maybe?"

He had no idea if that was the right answer, or where it was going to lead them. But he wasn't particularly surprised either. Phil began his lectures in a very unusual way more than once.

"What if you made this scarf yourself, with your own hands? And you tried very hard and put a lot of work into it?"

He shrugged.

"Then yes, probably," he admitted, now really feeling like the world's worst egoist. "I would probably be upset."

Phil smiled understandingly.

"But if in the end Wilbur is wearing any scarf and doesn't get cold, wouldn't that be the most important thing?"

Oh. Oh, so that's it...

"I think... I think so."

"Exactly." He felt a hand on his cheek again and hesitantly turned his head to meet Phil's eyes. "It's perfectly normal to feel disappointed when someone refuses to accept your help. Especially if you care about them a lot and want the best for them. You have every right to feel this way. But you have to remember what's most important in all of this."

He nodded slowly.

"Wilbur."

"Yhm. If it helps you two more to talk to yourself than to talk to me, that's fine. I'm at peace as long as you're safe and happy. And if Wilbur needs a little bit of chaos today, you should respect that. Tommy's not your rival here, Techno. You're on the same side. You're allies."

It all sounded so easy when he said it like that, so logical and meaningful, when he thought about it calmly, without all the emotions and doubts and the incessant noise in his head. Maybe even too easy. Maybe he should have figured it out on his own and understood right away, maybe other people, normal people, wouldn't have such a problem with it, maybe he was just not made to be a part of something bigger without destroy it somehow...

He sniffed, blinking rapidly to stop more tears.

"Now I feel bad for being angry," he muttered, feeling idiotic about how much he needed reassurance now, and at the same time not doing anything about it and throwing his arms around Phil's neck without warning. "I'm too stupid for all of this."

Phil immediately hugged him back.

"It's not true," he denied just as quickly, and even though Techno didn't quite believe him, he felt a little better with the words. "You're just way too young for that. You both are. You shouldn't have to think about it at all."

Techno didn't answer. He just closed his eyes, slowly accepting the thought that, apparently, things aren't always exactly as they should be. And maybe this time, exceptionally, it wasn't his fault.

* * *

Wilbur showed up to dinner, still a little sleepy, hair disheveled, holding familiar looking drawings in one hand and Tommy's tightly in the other. Phil grinned at the sight of them, setting plates down on the table and stretching his hands towards his younger son for a hug. He looked as if he needed it just as badly himself, and for the first time since this morning, he

breathed really freely when Wilbur immediately snuggled into him, hugging him tightly around the waist.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, looking up uncertainly as if he really expected anyone to be angry with him.

Phil just kissed his forehead.

"You did nothing wrong," he assured, and his voice was so confident and tender that it was impossible not to believe him. "I made a stew. Your favourite. Techno helped."

Wilbur glanced towards the table, at the steaming dish, and smiled as broadly as he could. Sometimes Techno really admired his acting skills.

"It *was* my favorite dish," he once said, when they were full of food and lying on the grass in the garden. The sun was shining right in their eyes, so Techno put his hand to his forehead to be able to look at it at all. "Three years ago. The first really good thing I ever ate... in my life, I guess. *Three years ago* ", he repeated, pointing to the number on his fingers for emphasis. "And he still cooks it whenever I'm sad."

He sighed dramatically as if he was actually suffering unimaginably having to eat something that was not in the top three favorite dishes. Techno rolled his eyes.

"Just tell him," he said, and Wilbur hummed, pressing his lips together as he clearly pondered something deeply.

"Nooo... Let him be happy," he decided finally. "It's nice. Though I wouldn't be offended if he ordered a pizza once."

Apparently, he didn't plan to get picky out of the blue now either, because he was emptying his plate for races with Tommy, and the two almost synchronously asked for more, as if they hadn't eaten for at least a month. Or maybe the kid has already been properly trained, that sometimes it really doesn't take much for Phil to brighten up.

Techno really wanted to follow in their footsteps, but he had enough energy to sluggishly stab the meat with a fork and actually swallow a smaller piece from time to time.

"I ate while we were cooking," he muttered, feeling Phil's anxious gaze on him.

For peace of mind (his own, but mostly Phil's), he forced a few more bites into himself before he put down the cutlery and pressed his back against the chair. Normally he would have gone to his room long ago, but Wilbur still didn't say a word to him, every now and then giving him furtive glances that he couldn't decipher. So Techno waited, though he didn't quite know what for, nervously tapping his heel on the table leg.

"Can I see?" Phil nodded at the drawings, which Wilbur had put back on the chair, exceptionally unoccupied by a stuffed cow.

Tommy nodded quickly, leaning over the table to hand him the papers, so eager to do it that he almost put his elbow in the plate.

"Here!"

For some reason, Phil seemed almost touched by this. Techno was slowly beginning to accept the fact that he had apparently completely lost his understanding of his family.

The pile of drawings turned out to be in fact one and the same drawing in several copies - three colored stripes and a black semicircular something on the left side. Phil scrutinized the first few, probably looking for any profound differences, but eventually even he had to give up.

"They are all the same?"

"Yes! Because it's our flag. Wilbur and I are going to sell flags now. So I did a lot of them."

Wilbur put down his fork and looked at the boy in genuine amazement, then rolled his eyes.

"Drugs, Tommy. Not flags. *Drugs*."

The child nodded without thinking for a second, then he seemed to realize that he didn't understand because he stared at his drawings, frowning.

Phil, by contrast, understood all too well. And he didn't look like he was going to praise them for their creativity.

"Wilbur," he scolded his son, perhaps more concerned about the potential destructive influence on Tommy. Because, frankly speaking, there was no help for Wilbur himself.

"It's just in a game! Not for real!"

"Can't you sell something normal while you're playing? I don't know, burgers?"

The boy grimaced.

"But it's boring!" he was indignant, but quickly got broken under one sharper look. "Ugh, okay. Let there be burgers!" He crossed his arms, sliding a little lower on the back of the chair. And then, softly enough that only the other boys could hear, he murmured, "Over my dead body."

Techno smiled at him to show his understanding, but Wilbur just looked away and didn't even glance his way for the rest of the meal. He wasn't very subtle about it, almost knocking the glass over, reaching for the juice jug blindly so as not to have to look to the right, so after a while even Phil noticed something was wrong. He looked from one son to the other for a clue, but Techno was unable to give him something that he himself didn't have. But he could make life easier for everyone and just get out of his brother's sight.

He lunged on the bed, pressing the pillow tight to his chest, trying to ignore the buzzing in his head and the unpleasant twist in his stomach. He reached for the headrest, catching a bear from between the pillows, a little less white but still surprisingly soft. It's not like he still slept with a stuffed animal, of course not! Steve was just a supportive bear. Perfect to throw it at a burglar, or to carry it in front of you at night like a shield, or to press it tightly against your

face so that no one hears you scream in anger. So keeping him close was perfectly reasonable, logical and absolutely not childish.

Though now, carefully stroking the soft fur and staring at his own reflection in the large, glittering eyes, Techno didn't feel like an adult at all.

When he heard the knock on the door, he wasn't going to answer at first. Phil had gotten tired of him today, he deserved a quiet evening, especially if he had to explain to Tommy what 'drugs' were. But then the sound was repeated a second, third time, and the fourth time it was joined by a soft one:

"Hey, Techno. I know you're there."

He frowned as he rose to sit up, and for a moment he really considered telling his brother to piss off. But he would probably hurt himself the most with that, so he just sighed and nodded.

"Come in," he muttered.

The door squeaked softly and Wilbur slipped in, closing it behind and leaning his back against it.

"Hi." He smiled hesitantly, then waved at him, probably for lack of anything else to do. "Um... I liked the honey from you."

Techno frowned.

"You mean tea?"

"I mean honey with a little boiling water."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment, examining the ground and trying to see through each other. And then, quite suddenly, and at the same time naturally and in the only possible way, all the tension was gone. Wilbur smiled, Techno shifted a bit aside and everything was fine again; comfortable silence, light air, and his brother, annoying and stupid and exactly where he should always be. Near him.

"Are you mad at me?" Wilbur asked, hopping more onto the bed than sitting on it. You can see one broken frame was not the peak of his capabilities.

Techno raised an eyebrow.

"Why would I be?"

Wilbur opened his mouth, but hesitated and just shrugged.

"I don't know. Just like this."

He was usually a really good liar. He must have been under a lot of stress to collapse that way. For reassurance, Techno nudged his side with his foot.

"And honestly?"

Wilbur bit his lip as he began to play with his fingers.

"I ignored you today. And left you out," he said finally, looking everywhere except at his brother. "And you were upset. I *know* you were," he added immediately, so Techno bit his tongue at the last minute before denying it.

On the one hand, he felt a little lighter without having to lie. On the other hand, he wasn't sure what other options he had. Wilbur had a right not to want to see him, or talk to him, or even remember his existence. The last thing he should worry about is whether he has offended someone by his nervous breakdown. "When you sink and call for help, you don't worry about scaring the fish," Phil had once told them. And although Techno himself had trouble getting rid of his remorse at times, he wasn't going to let his brother tire of them too.

"Are you upset when I leave you out?" He asked carefully, and Wilbur, to his surprise, nodded immediately.

"Always," he admitted, and he must have realized that it didn't sound very good, because he quickly added, "I mean... It's nothing wrong. That you do that, I mean. Sometimes it's just not a good time, is it?" He shrugged. "It's just... 'Cause sometimes you get so angry and- And I remember how you were at the beginning. And I'm afraid you'll just stay like that. And again you won't want to know me at all and..."

The longer he talked, the quieter and less confident his voice became, and his gaze drifted to the side, as far as possible towards his brother. Techno wasn't quite sure if he wanted to know all this, let alone hear it outright. On the one hand, he felt a little better with the thought that he was clearly not the only selfishness in the family. On the other...

He remembered how he had thrown a book at the door of his room a few weeks earlier and yelled at his brother to get out, and the sound of the guitar immediately ceasing.

He tried to swallow, but his throat was so tight he could barely breathe through it.

"Are you afraid of me sometimes?"

Wilbur didn't really have to answer. The way he looked at him would be enough.

"No? I'm *worried* about you. Why should I be afraid of you?" He straightened proudly.

"You're a pussy and I could knock you down with one hand and a blindfold."

He elbowed him in blatant provocation, and Techno immediately gratefully seized the chance to change the subject. Even if it's so idiotic.

"Go on."

He spread his arms wide, but Wilbur suddenly became very interested in the condition of his nails.

"Not now... I just don't want to."

"Then you better start."

"No." He brushed his hair back in a gesture that seemed to be a sign of his incredible seriousness and maturity, but all Techno could think about was that one summer when his brother pretended to be a mermaid for a good month and acted very 'mysteriously' behind each time he was near the water. "I'm an artist, I don't descend to such low level."

Techno snorted, shaking his head with pity.

"You're shit, not any 'artist'."

"Hey!" he was indignant, they turned so that they could kick him in the calf. So much for maturity. "Dad says that my music is great and that I have talent!"

This time Techno laughed completely in earnest.

"Yes, when you scrawled those ugly things for him, he also said that you're the reincarnation of Picasso."

He had expected a very similar reply, but to his surprise Wilbur's face softened.

"I missed you," he said in a soft, low voice, leaning forward and resting his forehead on his brother's shoulder.

Techno blinked in confusion.

"It was only one day," he noted, but Wilbur only shook his head.

"Still," he insisted, with some strange, uncharacteristic seriousness and certainty. Which he broke up right now by jabbing his brother in the side with his finger. "Say you missed me too."

Techno raised his eyebrows.

"For your stupid talk? Not at all." He snorted, and immediately earned another stab for it.

"Say it."

And more.

"No."

"*Say it.*" Wilbur straightened, this time making a full-fledged attack on him. "Say it, say it, say it...!"

"Fine!" Techno finally grabbed his wrists and held him down. "God, you're worse than Tommy." He cleared his throat and looked away, feeling his ears start to five. "I missed you a little."

Wilbur looked downright indecently pleased with himself. Like a cat that had brought home a dead canary, dropped the cup on the floor and finally settled perfectly in the center of the keyboard.

"Better," he said, then, a little sure to me, pointed at his brother's hair. "Can I...?"

He could. He could even if Techno were still mortally offended and he knew it perfectly well.

There were exactly two people whom he was willing to entrust his hair to. There used to be three, but six months ago, when he had a particularly bad day, he tried to cut it off with scissors and lost some trust in himself. Phil spent a good hour smoothing out the jagged ends. Mainly because he had to stop every now and then to soothe and console tha boy.

"I could-" he began, and Techno immediately tensed and slipped out from under his hand.

"I'm not going to therapy," he pointed out sharply, leaving no room for opposition.

In fact, he wasn't sure why he was insisting on it so much. Certainly he was ashamed of telling a stranger things that he didn't dare to confess even to his family. And he was just as irritated by the thought of hearing how insane and crazy he was, because okay, Wilbur might have argued that nothing like that was going to happen, and that wasn't what therapy was all about, but Wilbur didn't throw things and yell at people and he wasn't cutting his hair only because he suddenly remembered something. Wilbur was... normal.

Perhaps that was what Techno feared the most. That in fact everything is perfectly fine with him, that there is no top-down cause, no reason. That he's just a nightmare child and an even worse person. Phil had always supported him, always defended and comforted him... but Techno wasn't at all sure if he would still do it if he found out that his son didn't deserve any sympathy.

He wasn't even sure if he would call him his son any more.

He wasn't going to take unnecessary risks. Not when he was doing perfectly well on his own and in perfect control, as always.

Wilbur was just finishing brushing his hair and was starting to braid it when the door swung open and Tommy burst in, flushed from shower, towel over his shoulders, and the need to say a lot of words in random order. But instead he froze, stepped back, and with a dramatic "Oh!" shut the door back. It took several long, awkward seconds before they heard a soft, uncertain knock.

"Can I come in?"

Wilbur raised his eyebrows, leaning out to exchange glances with his brother. Techno grimaced, but finally, with the utmost reluctance and nipping a very loud groan in the bud, he said:

"Come in."

And, according to all the laws of the universe, he very quickly regretted this tide of grace.

Tommy, clearly drenched by the influence of the last person he should emulate, jumped onto the bed more than climbed on it, and immediately, with a delighted sigh, stretched his hands out toward the pink hair.

"Can I too?"

"Nope." Wilbur pushed the already finished braid halfway out of Tommy's reach, to strengthen it, passed him with his free hand by patting him on the still-extended hands. The child groaned in frustration, making a scowl. "You have to deserve it. But if you want, I can help you with yours. I could make these little braids for you, just to the side."

He put a rubber band on his braid and immediately switched to the victim, cupping Tommy's cheeks in both hands and looking very seriously at his head from all sides. The boy, surprisingly, endured it very patiently and seemed to even hold his breath in anticipation.

"Yhm, yes, definitely." Wilbur finally released him and moved a little closer, brushing his fingers through the fine hairs just above his ear. "If we wait a while, we can do something about it."

Tommy beamed as if he had been promised at least a sack of presents. Techno by no means shared his enthusiasm. Because whatever you say, waiting somehow averagely fit 'for a while'. On average, it matched 'not forever.' And it didn't really fit with 'I know he won't stay.'

Sometimes Techno felt like the only logical person in his family. And sometimes he didn't consider it a distinction at all.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo... It'll only get worse from now on.

✨ Have fun! ✨ 😊

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I worked at this with @Katricia! Big "Thank you!" for her!

Tommy was a thief.

Techno didn't feel particularly comfortable using the word, not when there was still a small refrigerator in his room that Phil regularly refilled with his favorite snacks. He also didn't dare to say it out loud, because each time he came to the conclusion that he would have sounded extremely childish, complaining about the disappearing cereals and the jam jars when the kitchen was still full, the shelves in the pantry were sagging, and not even once had he gotten a chance to be hungry.

Yet there was something extremely irritating about discovering that his favorite things were gone under mysterious circumstances. Almost as annoying as knowing it sounds damn familiar and he really is the last person to make any comment on it. So he gritted his teeth and limited himself to silent gratitude whenever Phil put more boxes of cereal into the basket 'just in case' while shopping.

He had never been particularly understanding, let alone patient, though, so when things in his room also began to disappear, change places, or wear traces of small, sticky hands, the invisible line was crossed.

"Tommy." Phil sounded way too calm for someone who just had undeniable evidence of a crime before his eyes. Techno was of the opinion that Phil should just let him personally deal with the gremlin and then tear the crown from his cold, dead hands. "You can't take other people's things without asking."

Tommy, hiding behind the couch like a barricade, just pressed the plastic crown tighter to his chest.

"But if I asked, he wouldn't give it to me!" He exclaimed confidently, as if he hadn't really seen a slight contradiction in his own argument.

Phil closed his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"If you knew you couldn't take it, then why did you?"

"Because he's stupid," Techno muttered before he could bite his tongue. Fortunately for him, no one heard it.

"Because... Because he doesn't use it anyway!" Tommy puffed his cheeks, crossing his arms. The crown swayed on his wrist and Techno had to focus really hard to remember that pulling it away by force wasn't a good idea. Not in front of witnesses. "And I needed it!"

"If you need anything, you should come to me. We can buy you the same, or at least a similar one."

"But I want this one!" The child stamped its foot in emotion. "You can buy a new one for Techno."

Phil sighed, turning to look at his son almost pleadingly, but he was already shaking his head.

"Sorry, Tommy, Techno doesn't agree."

"Then make him!"

"It's his stuff, Tommy, I can't force him to do anything with it."

"But you're forcing me!"

"Tommy..."

The boy must have realized at last that he was tearing his throat for nothing, or maybe he was disturbed by a slightly sharper note in Phil's voice, because he inhaled loudly and in one movement slipped the crown off his wrist.

"Fine!" He threw it with all his strength, so the plastic just slapped on the couch cushions and rolled to the floor. "I didn't like it anyway!"

He stamped his foot again, turned on his heel, and ran up the stairs without turning back even once. Not that Techno even noticed it, busy checking that the crown was intact. As much as cheap plastic can be after two years of collecting dust on the shelf.

"Sam could hurry up looking for him a home," he grunted, and this time Phil looked at him with clear reprimand.

"Techno..."

"What? He's so annoying."

"Really?" Phil raised his eyebrows, then smirked as a door slammed loudly somewhere upstairs. "Oh, there's our favorite sound..."

And okay, logically speaking, Techno knew he probably deserved it. But this didn't prevent him from feeling very deeply offended.

"Don't compare me to him."

"I don't compare." Somehow it didn't sound convincing at all. "I just think you're too hard on him."

Techno was getting ready to argue further, but after a short thought, he decided that it wasn't worth it.

"I'm not at all," he only grunted, glancing down at the slightly glistening crown. "But thanks, by the way. That, you know..." He squeezed his fingers a little tighter. "You didn't make me give it back."

He would never admit it out loud, but he knew that he was sometimes sentimental and became very attached to objects, especially those that were of no particular value to others. Like the red cloak he still kept in his wardrobe, though it had long since faded. It used to be an ordinary blanket, extremely soft and warm, but Phil noticed that he liked to cover himself with it in the evenings as they sat on the bed together, telling stories of their own imaginary kingdom. When Techno returned from school one day, the blanket had a white fluffy collar and two gold buttons sewn on that allowed it to be worn on the shoulders like a long coat.

"I don't sew the best," Phil had explained, smiling as he saw the child admiring his new creation in front of the mirror. "But let's pretend it looks like a royal mantle, okay?"

Techno didn't need to pretend at all. Especially since the coat matched the crown he had been given a few months earlier, when Wilbur had insisted on celebrating their adoption anniversaries.

"It's like having birthdays twice," he argued when Techno pointed out once again that no matter what the date on their adoption certificates said, they weren't real twins. "Once on your own and once together."

Phil, obviously to be expected, was more than willing to buy a cake and let them invite a few friends, which he probably regretted a little after the constant noise for several hours, as he sat on the stairs, watching the chaos in the living room downstairs, drinking a fourth coffee and clearly sorry that he couldn't add anything stronger to it.

Wilbur lost his crown that same day and wasn't at all concerned about it, but Techno set his own in a place of honor and made sure that no dust settled on it.

"We can buy you a new one," Phil offered now, seeing him try to polish the plastic. "More... better."

Techno just shook his head.

"This one is okay," he muttered, clutching the toy tighter to his chest. Because it's been a year. A long year and Phil still hadn't changed his mind. He was still glad Techno was with him. He was still reading him to sleep, still doing homework with him patiently, still laughing at his jokes. He still called him *his son* .

More than two years had passed now, and Phil was still looking at him with the same tenderness as he pushed back his hair and leaned in to bring their foreheads together.

"You're welcome."

* * *

Tommy, as it quickly turned out, didn't know how to be offended for long. Just as he couldn't sit still, take care of himself, or understand that someone might simply not want his company. It wasn't even an hour before he ran down the stairs, looked around like a predator looking for prey, and smiled broadly when he actually managed to find it.

"Techno!" He jumped onto the couch, almost landing the older boy on his feet. "Techno, you have to help me! But now, now, right now!"

Techno, knowing full well that ignoring a child had the opposite effect and only gave him an additional excuse to scream, lifted the remote with deep reluctance and muted the TV.

"What do you want?"

The boy, still jumping up and down, as if he wanted to test the effect of gravity on his own skin, waved the stack of pages in the air.

"I wrote a letter! To Tubbo! Very long one! And you gotta help me send it!"

Techno frowned, really trying to see anything on the furiously fluttering pages for a moment, but eventually he lost his patience and nudged the boy with his foot in the stomach hard enough to make him lose his balance and smack his ass against the pillows.

"Hey!" He was indignant, but quickly forgot about his anger, leaning closer as Techno took the pages from him and unfolded them on his knee.

'I wrote' turned out to be a somewhat exaggerated term, unless humanity had recently made a sharp turn in its development towards picture writing.

"This is me!" Tommy rushed to the explanation, anticipating any questions. "And that's Phil and Wilbur and you!" He tapped each of the lopsided colored blobs in turn. "Wilbur said I had to draw you as the smallest."

Techno grimaced as he stared at the shapeless pink blotch.

"Of course he said so, that idiot..." he muttered, but Tommy either missed it or chose to ignore it.

"And everything is colored so that Tubbo knows it's okay and doesn't have to worry," he continued, clearly proud of his own ingenuity. "And this," he pulled another card from underneath, "is Tubbo and me, so he will know I miss him."

This time Techno looked at the work a bit more closely. He had to admit that, despite himself, he was a bit curious about the famous Tubbo, about which he must have heard much more

and more often than he would have liked. At times he had the impression that the strange child had grown into a celebrity in their home.

"We did that with Tubbo too!" Tommy was pleased when Phil found a pile of large cardboard boxes in the garage and offered to turn them into a rocket. "And we had our own plane! But then it started to rain, and we forgot to hide it, and it got so..." He made a sound very aptly reminiscent of soggy slush. "And I said to make a boat out of it, because the boats are wet anyway, but it fell apart." He paused for a moment, focusing with red paint on the already trimmed cardboard, but his movements became much slower, and finally he lowered the brush. "I miss Tubbo," he confessed suddenly. "I like living here because you guys are cool. But I'd like to go home now."

Techno didn't dare to look at Phil. He could imagine what his face was at that moment, he didn't need a live report.

Two days later, Tommy was given a beehive-shaped bedside lamp as a gift and wouldn't let it be turned off even during the day. Never before had he been so fascinated by anything that he could actually sit still for several minutes passively looking at the light and for the first time he seemed really relaxed.

Wilbur quickly spoiled this effect by playing with the flashlight with him and watching him chase it like a cat.

Tubbo in the picture... didn't look special. Apart from the fact that the color blot wasn't generally human. As Tommy informed him, the yellow something lower down was a backpack with a pair of insect wings that the boy's mom had made for him herself, and the brown square in the corner of the page was the famous wet boat. Tommy drew himself as the much taller one, but Techno somehow didn't trust his ability to render proportions correctly. Anyway - quite an average child. Absolutely nothing special. Not that he was going to say it out loud - he preferred to live to see tomorrow.

"Aha..." so he only muttered, shifting the card to the very bottom.

The third and last, thank God, drawing was definitely less colorful than the rest. It was also the only one where Tommy didn't include himself.

"Ah..." The boy hesitated, his enthusiasm visibly waning. Until now, he had been kneeling on the mattress, practically resting on Techno's shoulder, but now he pulled back a little and began to play with his fingers. "And this is my mom. So that Tubbo would remember to check if she was okay when I couldn't."

Techno felt as if someone had suddenly pushed a handful of sand into his mouth. He tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry and tight, and even if he could find the right words, he probably wouldn't have been able to pronounce them.

"Oh," he just choked out, clenching his fingers tighter on the drawing.

When he was very young, he was always curious to know what his mother might look like. What color was her hair and her eyes, was she tall enough to put him up on the top shelf in

the store, or was she so short she wouldn't even have to crouch to kiss him on the forehead. Was he so similar to her that everyone would immediately know that they are family, or rather completely different, that they would wonder how miraculously they're related, and that she would laugh at this stupid talk, because it's obvious that they are and that he's her child, her son, whom she always wanted, whom she loves more than life, whom she would never give up or abandon... His vision of her changed on average once every few months, depending on what fairy tale he had just watched, what women he passed on the street during a walk, and what random features he found in them the prettiest. And what house he went to this time - because his imaginary mother never, absolutely never looked like the one who happened to foster him.

With one exception.

Techno remembered the one time he had heard the word 'mom' and for the first time in his life he was thinking of someone in particular, someone real, not some vague, imaginary character. When he was drawing her portrait and then he had someone to show it to. When he was calling her in the middle of the night and someone actually came to calm him down and put him back to sleep. When he was someone's child, he was someone's son, when someone really loved him...

He remembered that way too well. And he tried damn hard to forget.

He flinched when Tommy tugged on his sleeve.

"Can we send it now?" The boy jerked restlessly, clearly bored with the long hiatus in the supply of attention. "I made an envelope!"

He took a piece of paper stuck into a rectangle out of his pocket, proudly presenting his spark of creativity to the world. Techno would like to be at least half as sure of success. But something told him that only now would they encounter a real obstacle.

"Do you know his address?" He asked, and he was absolutely not surprised when the boy blinked, tilting his head.

"No? But I wrote it's for Tubbo."

He turned the envelope over, displaying large, colorful, and very lopsided letters. Apparently he wasn't sure how to write "b" because each of them was facing the opposite direction, which, in some strange way, was even cute.

Techno frowned. He didn't call anything Tommy did 'cute'. He simply didn't.

"It's a little imprecise," he explained, of course to little effect.

"But I wrote that to my Tubbo. To no other."

"It's still not enough. Do you remember the name of the street where you lived?"

Tommy must have finally realized something was really up because he stopped spinning and looked at him almost helplessly.

"No?" He repeated, his chin trembling. "But it's nothing, isn't it? Will you send it? You can do it, right?"

Techno sighed heavily, already opening his mouth to deny it, but as soon as he looked into his large, hopeful eyes, he realized immediately that he couldn't. Tommy could be damn annoying and loud and obtrusive. And he was, indeed. But he was also a small kid who missed his best friend. Techno had no idea what it was like, before he found his way to Phil, he rarely spoke to other kids at all. But he just had enough empathy to imagine how painful the separation must have been. No one was able to make him be nice to the child, but there was a big difference between being emotionally distant and brutally stripping him of hope.

He sighed a second time and held out his hand for the envelope.

"I'll try," he muttered, carefully folding the drawings in half and tucking them into the homemade envelope. He ignored the fact that the glue had already dried in a few places and was not fulfilling its function at all. "I'll do what I can."

Tommy grinned broadly and, with a deafening screech, lunged to hug his neck. It didn't take him more than a few seconds, because he couldn't sit still any more, but Techno felt it took forever anyway. It wasn't that he didn't like cuddling... well, maybe it was, in part. Phil and Wilbur were the only people he had allowed this to happen so far, and, to tell the truth, he hadn't planned any changes on this topic. But Tommy didn't ask for his opinion at all. He just snuggled tightly into him, as if Techno hadn't yelled at him just an hour earlier, and as if he hadn't been chasing him out of his room all the time, or glared at him most of the time. At a small, annoying flea whose purpose in life is to make his life difficult and remind him that he can't jump anymore.

He wasn't sure he liked the sudden sympathy and affection he evoked in him. But he slipped the letter into his pocket a little more carefully than necessary, and then, just as gently, he hid it in his room, between books. Phil probably wouldn't approve of this lie. He would probably give him a whole lecture on honesty and the fact that the truth is always better than even the prettiest lie. But Techno still believed that sometimes it was better to just buy a new fish and hope no one would find out.

Even if Tommy will be angry about it one day, even if one day he realizes that Tubbo never got his letter, and all his hope was a lie, he would probably be in a completely different house by then, with a completely different family. He will take the aquarium with him, he will take any goldfish, whatever it may be, and Techno will never hear his righteous complaints. So somehow he couldn't feel guilty about it.

* * *

There were times when Techno could honestly admit that he wasn't even a bit jealous of this weird, sticky bond between Tommy and Wilbur. In those moments, he wanted to pack them both into a large cardboard box, send them to the post office as far away as possible, and wait

for them to send him a postcard, which he would read in absolute silence, undisturbed by any screams. Unfortunately, since all the cardboard boxes still cluttered the living room as a giant rocket, he had to content himself with glaring at them from his book, hoping that at some point his eyesight would actually magically acquire killer properties.

"I said you can look, not touch!" Wilbur, who was holding the guitar behind his back, almost reclining on it, tried to hold the child to a safe distance with his foot.

"But I want to!"

"I don't care! Your hands are dirty and you're going to break something!"

Tommy puffed up his cheeks, which might have been of use if he hadn't been stabbed in one of them right now.

"Phiiil...!" He moaned, looking towards the table. "Wilbur is mean! And stupid! And ugly too!"

Phil, who was working on some project on his laptop, didn't even look in their direction. Techno sometimes wondered if he had developed the art of absolute mental escape from reality over time, or if he had just become a little deaf.

"If he says no, it means no," he finally said as his name came out at least a few times in a matter of seconds, in ever-higher tones. "It's his guitar, Tommy. I can't make him do anything."

The boy clearly didn't like that answer, because he wrinkled his nose and this time he didn't hesitate to catch the still prodding foot with his teeth. Wilbur squeaked, almost falling on the guitar, but then straightened up and swung his hand, probably pointing at the very center of the pale hair.

Techno was definitely not holy when it came to fraternal scuffles. He could kick Wilbur under the table for so long and so fiercely that they both ended up with bruises, or he could go into his brother's room, throw him off his chair, and walk out like nothing, just because he was bored. Not to mention a million times when Wilbur tried a similar trick and ended up pinned to the floor immediately. Neither of them ever minded. Techno would even risk saying that Wilbur himself asked for it the moment he started stabbing him with a carrot in the middle of the garden for absolutely no reason whatsoever. But even in the heat of the fight, there were signals they never ignored. The way sometimes Wilbur started to breathe far too fast, his eyes widened and even if he didn't say a word, Techno instantly loosened his grip, immediately pulled away and raised his hands to let him know he would do nothing else. How sometimes he himself suddenly felt trapped, how his chest was pressed by a nonexistent weight, how for a moment he forgot where and with whom he was and it took a long moment to calm down. That Wilbur stopped trying to scare him after that one time when he suddenly jumped around a corner at him, and Techno nearly blackened his eye, missing by inches. They both cried probably more than was necessary - Wilbur blaming himself for the whole situation, Techno absolutely terrified of his own reflexes. He was sure Phil hadn't slept at all that night, with the two boys at his sides pressed against him like he was the only safe haven.

Either way, whether it was an accident, a game, or a real argument, they always knew when to stop. When feelings and memories of completely different, unpleasant moments began to come into play, when the joking "Stop it!" turned to heartfelt despair when a single flinch or step back was no longer mere instinct and began to mean something more.

Apparently, this worked with Tommy as well. Because when he curled his arms and squeezed his eyes shut, Techno just knew.

And, apparently, Wilbur saw it as well, for he immediately lowered his hand, moving much slower than before.

"Oh." He blinked and quickly turned to carefully set the guitar down on the floor before moving a little closer to the youngest. "Tommy..." He leaned in to meet his eyes. "Someone hit you before?"

Phil immediately jerked his head up from his laptop, staring at them, alert, ready to run to help and, apparently, not deaf.

Tommy wrinkled his nose, wincing.

"You," he grunted and earned a slight smack on the ear for it.

"Except for me, you moron."

"You're a moron yourself!" He got indignant, leaping to his feet and bouncing on the couch. "And you're ugly. Memememe, I'm Wilbur and I love my guitar so much that I will marry it..." he mocked in a high-pitched voice. "That's what you sound like!"

Wilbur opened his mouth, clearly already devising a very intelligent answer worthy of a fight against such a powerful six-year-old opponent, but in the end he changed his mind and only lifted his chin high.

"I will not lower myself to your level," he said with all the dignity he still had. And there wasn't much of it.

Techno rolled his eyes.

"It wouldn't be much of a difference," he said, pretending he hadn't taken his eyes from the book for a second. "You just need to bend over a little."

He felt a reproachful look on him, which he completely ignored. First, because if he were to worry about either of them, he wouldn't have time for anything else, and second, because Tommy, while still trying to keep his face tight, visibly growled and slumped down on the back of the couch. He stared at his feet for a moment, his fingers flexing, seeming to lose some of his usual confidence with each passing second.

"Mom was sometimes... very angry with me," he finally said softly. "More than usual. But then she always apologized!" He added quickly. "And she was sorry, really!"

There was something damn sad about hearing him try to defend someone who had hurt him and who absolutely didn't deserve any excuse. As if it worried him more that someone might think his mother was a bad person than the fact that she actually was. Techno would a hundred times prefer to be able to say that he doesn't understand it at all, that Tommy is just weird and he will probably soon understand that he is approaching it the wrong way. But he still remembered the moment when he himself realized that maybe - maybe! - he didn't deserve everything that still happens to him, that maybe - maybe! - the people around him have no good intentions at all, and their behavior is not normal. It wasn't a particularly pleasant discovery. Especially that this knowledge gave him nothing at the time, except the conviction that the world is bloody unfair after all.

He leaned over the back of the chair and, reaching as far as possible, hit Wilbur with the closed book on his thigh. The latter screamed, completely surprised, both by the blow itself and by the dull crack that spread across the room. Techno shrugged.

"I'm sorry."

His brother breathed out in indignation.

"What was that for?"

"It doesn't matter. I apologized, didn't I? So it doesn't count anymore."

Wilbur looked at him, clearly shocked, but then pressed his lips together and leaned toward him, trying to hit his shoulder.

"Don't demonstrate those sick philosophies on me!" He huffed as Tommy looked from one to the other, increasingly confused, until he finally turned to Phil as if begging for help.

He didn't have to ask twice.

"Boys." Phil closed his laptop, getting up from the table. "That's enough. Techno," he looked at his older son, eyebrow raised high. "I appreciate the demonstration, but leave your brother alone. And in the future, perhaps limit yourself to the theory."

Techno shrugged, but as soon as Phil looked away, he immediately stuck his tongue out at Wilbur. This one didn't owe him. The desire to smack him with a book a second time rose sharply.

"Tommy." Phil sat down next to the boy, clearly trying to give me a little more space, in keeping with all his experience so far. Tommy, however, was deeply respectful of his efforts, and immediately rose to his lap, resting his cheek against his chest. "Oh." Phil blinked a little dazed, but then regained consciousness and wrapped his arms around the child, one hand carefully stroking his head. "Tommy, listen. I know you love your mom. But people sometimes make mistakes and do bad things, even those we love very much."

The boy just hid his face in his shirt, wrapping his arms around him tighter.

"But she did apologize," he muttered, but although he was clearly trying to sound as confident as he did a few weeks ago, his stubbornness was clearly waning and it was obvious that he was beginning to notice the inaccuracies himself. In the long run, it was certainly a good and promising change, but Techno knew all too well that Tommy saw it differently at this point. His whole world was cracking and falling apart slowly, and Tommy had no idea whether he should try to fix it or run away from the destruction.

Phil leaned in to kiss his forehead.

"That's good. You should apologize when you do something wrong. But if she did it again afterward, then I'm afraid the apologies don't matter much."

The child looked up uncertainly to be able to look at him.

"Wilbur apologized when he locked me in the bathroom," he said, frowning. "And he didn't do that anymore after that."

He looked like he was trying hard to put it all together, and Phil smiled with obvious pride.

"Exactly. Because he knew you were very scared, and he wants you to feel safe. Everyone makes a mistake. But if someone apologizes and then keeps on doing the same... then they must not be sorry at all. Or they doesn't understand that they are doing something wrong."

Tommy hummed, either in agreement or in opposition, and for a moment just twirled the fabric of his shirt in his fingers, his thoughts very far away.

"But... But I was annoying," he muttered suddenly and then looked up, as if unsure if he said something right or not. "Very. And that's why..."

"So what?" Wilbur snorted, apparently unable to stay silent any longer. Techno couldn't tell if he was more stressed by the tense atmosphere or if he just felt a little guilty about causing it himself. "We are too. And dad probably wants to kill us sometimes, but somehow he doesn't."

Phil rolled his eyes but smiled slightly.

'Killing' is a bit too much. Throwing out the window, or leaving in the forest - maybe..." He raised his eyebrows, looking at his son, but then he became serious again, focusing all his attention on the child. "But Wilbur is right, Tommy. Being angry with someone doesn't mean you have the right to hurt them."

The boy looked at him closely, and for a moment it seemed as if he was trying to find some deception or lie. But then he relaxed and pulled away a bit, making a much more typical, somewhat snooty face.

"You're so weird," he said, wrinkling his nose.

Phil laughed and shook his head, ruffling the kid's hair with one hand, the other holding him in place as he squeaked and crumbled from under his hands.

"Why do all my kids always tell me this?"

"Because it's true," Wilbur said, and Techno nodded almost involuntarily. "You're weird."

"And old," Tommy added.

"And a little crazy, like us."

"And old."

"And sometimes you act like you never leave the house."

"And veeery old!"

"Okay, that's it." Phil rose from the couch, still holding Tommy to his chest. "With this window, it was a great idea after all."

He completely ignored the squeals and kicking as he carried the boy across the living room, and somehow managed to open the window and lean over the sill. Techno was absolutely sure the neighbors must be delighted about it, because Tommy never stopped trying to break the sound barriers.

"Nooo! Phiil...!" He laughed, shifting his legs in the air. "Let me go!"

Phil raised his eyebrows.

"Okay..." he agreed, loosening his grip a little, letting the boy slide a little closer to the ground.

"No!" Tommy naturally changed his mind instantly, clinging to his forearms. "No, no, don't let go, don't let go!"

"Am I still old?"

"No! You're not, you're not! I promise you're not!"

"Good." Phil smiled in satisfaction, pulling him back to the safe side of the sill and letting his small hands clutch at his shirt and his legs cup around his waist. "That's better."

Tommy, still giggling and definitely more amused than actually scared, glared at him immediately.

"But you're still weird," he said, puffing up his cheeks as the grip around him only tightened. "And you're so clingy."

"I just really like hugging you. Do you see them over there?" Phil turned so that he could nod at his sons. He lowered his voice a little. "They're traitors and they think they're too old for it. But it's the best thing in the world."

The kid's eyes flashed instantly.

"The best?"

"Yhm."

Tommy reached out, placing his hands on Phil's cheeks, bringing his face a little closer.

"You know what I like the most in the world?"

Phil, taken a bit by surprise, blinked, then smiled fondly.

"What?"

Tommy looked deep into his eyes.

"Tubbo," he said with all the firmness and certainty of the universe. Then he started squeaking again as Phil gave him a tickle attack.

"A little gremlin," he snorted, tossing the boy onto the couch and sitting down next to himself, ruffling his hair once more. And again, a bit more gently. And again. "You're like a cat," he said, sliding his fingers a little more to the left. Tommy practically purred as he tilted his head toward the touch and blushed instantly when he realized what he had just done.

"Not at all!" He gasped over Phil's laughter. "Cats are stupid and so are you, and I don't like it!"

"Of course you don't like it." Phil tilted his head back so he could nudge his finger on his nose. "You can see at a glance."

The boy puffed up his cheeks as he slumped a little lower.

"Not at all," he repeated emphatically, but then closed his eyes, tilting his head, clearly demanding more. "But my mother did that to me. Sometimes. And then she wasn't bad at all and I liked her."

Phil obeyed the silent request immediately, but he looked a lot more worried than he had been a moment ago.

"Oh," was all he said, and while Techno had never been the best at reading emotions, it was obvious even to him how torn he was at the moment. He looked exactly the same as whenever any of his sons recalled any kind event in any of the previous houses. At first, Techno didn't understand why he suddenly seemed so strangely sad then. Then, however, on one of the less good days, Wilbur came into his room and sat down on the bed without a word, clearly distant in his thoughts.

"Sometimes," he began after a long silence that no one tried to break, "I think I've made it all up for myself."

Techno slowly put the book down, moving a little closer.

"All?" He repeated, not really knowing what it was about.

Wilbur just nodded.

"All. That... that they were such..." He pursed his lips, staring at the floor. He took a deep breath, trying to pull himself together, but it still took a few seconds to find the right words. Or maybe just the courage to pronounce it. "Sometimes I think that they were not so bad, and I just made it up to myself. My mother always used to say that. That I dramatize to get attention. So everyone would feel sorry for me."

Techno waited patiently for something more, for some punch line that would make sense of it all, or for an assurance that it was just a stupid joke, but the longer they sat in complete silence, the more anger grew in him. Because Wilbur couldn't really think that, couldn't really believe it, Wilbur was too smart for that, too good, too-

"That's bullshit," he growled, tossing the book back on the table a little harder than he intended. It slid down the counter and hit the floor, making Wilbur flinch.

"But I really like it when someone cares about me," he protested, his voice weak, trembling with emotion, in spite of all his words, begging for denial. "And I like it when Phil says it wasn't my fault and-" His chin quivered and his eyes were moist. "So maybe..."

Techno felt like shaking him, so he would pull himself together and stop talking nonsense. He was restrained by the realization that it would be counterproductive, and Phil would definitely disapprove of the method. Phil probably wouldn't even think of something like that, with all his cool composure and knowing what to do anytime, anywhere.

Techno didn't have any of these things. But he did have a brother on the verge of hysteria, which to some extent motivated him to learn quickly.

He moved closer, placing a hand on Wilbur's shoulder in a slightly clumsy attempt to support him.

"Of course you like it," he said, trying to think about what Phil said and did at times like this. "I like it too. 'Cause it's Phil, he- He doesn't pity us, he just really... cares. And worried." He squeezed his arm a little tighter. "Everyone likes it when someone cares about them."

Wilbur looked unconvinced. In fact, he didn't seem to hear him at all. As if he was very, very deep underwater and Techno was shouting at him from the shore.

"They bought me a cake," he confessed suddenly. His feet jerked nervously and he rubbed one against the other, fingers closing on the sleeves of his T-shirt. "Once, for my birthday. And they said if I deserve I could get two pieces!"

He said it as if it were actually a reward worth walking back and forth through Hell. As if one day, one gesture, would reward the rest of the year. As if a piece of cake really had any value.

(Techno hated the thought that it might have for someone who went hungry most of the time.)

"And? Did you 'deserve' at least one?" He asked bitterly, knowing the answer in advance. Even so, he winced as he saw Wilbur curl his arms and lean his head, instinctively trying to appear smaller. He took a shallow, vibrating breath, and his hands began to tremble.

"No," he whispered, wiping his nose with his sleeve. "But maybe it was really my fault? And maybe they tried, but there was something wrong with me?"

Techno stared at him for a moment in silence.

"Maybe," he said finally, dry and almost emotionless. Then in one fluid movement he rolled up the sleeve of his blouse up to the elbow. "I can see very clearly how much mine 'tried'."

Wilbur's eyes widened so much that under other circumstances his shock would have been almost amusing.

"That's different!"

"Not at all." He shrugged, still staring at the scars, slowly running his fingers over them. "They were sometimes... nice too. Kinda." He grimaced. "Once we had a sports day at school or something like that. And my father came to watch. And he was surprisingly normal and nice and everyone around said I must be very happy that he's cheering me on. And I just dreamed that he would finally go away and I felt terribly bad about it. Because everyone was saying how cool it is, and I... Every time I fell over, or bumped into someone, or did something wrong, I was afraid that he would come over and scream and..." He paused, clenching his hands into a fist and with one strong jerk, pulling the sleeve over his wrist. "He wasn't cool at all. And it doesn't matter what the others said or that he was nice that one time."

Wilbur opened his mouth as if he wanted to argue with him again, but then shut it again, the only sound he could get out of was a soft, jerky sob. He rubbed his eyes, turning his face away, but his shoulders were trembling so much he couldn't fool anyone.

Techno had no idea what he should do, he wanted to help, he wanted to fix it all, but he didn't know how, because it was always Phil who... But he had to do something, he had to do anything, something sensible, something Phil would do, what Phil would do, what Phil would-

He leaned over his brother, carefully and somewhat awkwardly putting his arm around him. He felt a hand tighten on his forearm, and immediately pulled Wilbur even closer, hugging him so tightly that he would never forget it again.

"When I say something bad, Phil always says it happens to good people, too," he said, resting his cheek against his dark hair. "Doing something wrong, I mean."

Wilbur sniffed, even louder than before.

"Yhm."

"I guess it works the other way too, you know? That bad people will do good things sometimes."

Another loud pull.

"I think so..."

It didn't sound any closer to calming down, and Techno slowly loosened his grip just enough to look at him.

"Should I get Phil?" He asked, and somehow that made Wilbur cry for good.

Techno never forgot the way Phil looked at them that day. The way he had taken them in as if they were really in danger. The way he stroked Wilbur's hair, whispering nice words until the boy finally calmed down enough to be able to talk to him.

It was the same way he was looking at Tommy now, his fingers moving slowly and gently as if he was trying to compensate him.

It would be easier if bad people were always only bad. It would be easier if Wilbur could forget. It would be easier if Tommy could just hate his mother, if he could stop missing her and understand that his family home was not a good place. Even if someone was nice to him sometimes.

That very same night, Techno woke up to crying.

Which was nothing particularly strange about their house. True, Wilbur had nightmares far less than he used to, but he still screamed in his sleep, and Techno, even if he didn't like to admit it, was no better. Phil once joked that he was woken up at night more often than many parents of newborns, and he had to convince them for a long time that he didn't mean it was anything wrong and that they really didn't need to apologize. Techno still didn't quite believe him. But it was also hard to say that he was guided by reason when he sat on the bed at four o'clock, drenched in a cold sweat and didn't recognize where he was.

Either way, he was not surprised by the crying. It surprised him that it wasn't his brother's cry. He rubbed his eyes to wake up a little, and silently slipped out from under the covers, his bare feet snapping at the cold panels. He pressed the doorknob exactly as the door on the far side of the house creaked open. The hallway was lit by the pale light of the lamp and Techno blinked, trying to get used to the sudden change.

Tommy stood in the middle of the hall, one hand clutching a plush cow tightly, the other wiping his tear-stained cheeks, his chest rising and falling in loud, spasmodic sobs.

"Hey... Hey kiddo." Phil was already crouched beside him before Techno even noticed his presence. "What happened?"

He stroked his fair hair, but it had the opposite effect to what he had intended - the boy curled his shoulders, gasped loudly, and cried for good.

"I... want... mom!" He stuttered out between one sob and another, and oh, Techno would definitely prefer to never hear it, especially with a perfect view of Phil's face and all the emotions painted on it. The last time he saw him so worried was when Wilbur tried to hide his guitar in the middle of the night, convinced he might lose it for good in a moment.

"Oh. Come on, it's okay." He tried again, much slower and more carefully, and this time Tommy didn't escape from the touch, and even moved closer, resting his forehead against his shoulder and gripping his hand tightly on his T-shirt. "Relax. I'll take you up, okay? Hold Henry tight."

The boy sobbed loudly as he looked up.

"I want my mom," he repeated, a little quieter but with equal despair. Phil sighed, rocking him gently and stroking him soothingly on the back.

"I know, sweetheart. I know. She's not here now, but I promise you will be all right," he assured him, in the same gentle tone he used to comfort his sons. And, as is usual with them, this time he also asked, "You had a bad dream?"

Tommy sniffed, a little calmer but still clearly unhappy.

"Yhm... And I woke up and Henry fell to the floor." He pressed the toy a little tighter to his chest. "And he hit himself, and now he's sad."

Phil hummed in understanding as he stroked the cow's mouth.

"Oh my. Poor guy." He leaned in to kiss the plush head as if he were trying to heal a real bruise. Then he kissed Tommy's nose the same way. The boy chuckled as he tried to evade himself, but was kissed anyway, first on the forehead, then on the cheek. "That's better?"

The child nodded slowly.

"Yhm. Better..."

In fact, he still sounded a long way from actually 'better', with teary eyes and a tearful voice. But it was still a step in the right direction, so Phil smiled, tossing him gently in his arms.

"I'll take you to bed, okay? It is very late and you should have been asleep a long time ago."

Tommy nodded as if in acknowledgment, yawning widely.

"But you won't go away?" He asked as he wrapped arms around Phil's neck.

"No. I will stay until you fall asleep, okay?"

Techno closed the door carefully, backing into the room as silently as he could. He wasn't afraid that he might be in trouble for eavesdropping, Phil would be rather worried that he was up at the late time. But he didn't want Tommy to accidentally see him. Annoying or not, he deserved some privacy, especially at times like this. He deserved support and comfort, and that little bit of warmth that might never have been meant to replace his mother, but was definitely enough to make it through until morning.

So Techno tiptoed back to bed, pulled the covers over his head and pressed Steve tightly against his chest. He thought of the crying Wilbur, the drawing hidden in his books, of Tommy calling out to someone who would never answer.

And if he felt unimaginably lonely that night, no one would ever know.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Some Phil and Techno moments, 'cause I love to write these two.

Guess who got help from @Katricia? I did! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno had no idea how and when mid-August had passed. The scorching afternoons turned to the chilly evenings, and before he knew it, the word 'school' hung overhead again in silent menace, just waiting for its moment to strike.

"I'll have to enroll Tommy in elementary school," Phil said one morning, taking another pancake from the pan and adding it to a pile of identical ones.

Tommy didn't even flinch, still hunched over the table, his face in his forearms. He probably just fell asleep, tired after he and Wilbur had been sneaking from one bedroom to another for a good half of the night, giggling and knocking over every possible piece of furniture until Phil threatened to put them both in his own bed. Techno wasn't sure why they insisted on making noise in the middle of the night so much, but in fact, he was a little afraid to ask. The last time he had dared to question any of their brilliant plans at lunch, Tommy had tossed some of his carrots onto a plate for him.

"Here, calm yourself," he had advised in a very serious tone.

Techno had frowned at the food while Wilbur pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

"It wasn't even funny," Techno muttered, and immediately regretted the moment of sincerity when his brother exchanged a knowing look with the gremlin.

That look. The one that had so far been reserved only for the two of them, and no one else.

That's why he didn't say anything now, just shrugged his shoulders. School didn't fit into the 'not forever', but to tell the truth, he was slowly getting used to it.

"He could go to class with Drista and Ranboo," Wilbur said, his mouth full of pancakes. Phil gave him a scolding look, but made no comment.

"That would be nice," he just said before he frowned, as if he had just remembered something. "About that. Did you tell Tommy you'd put him in illegal cage fights?"

Wilbur blinked, putting his hand to his heart in silent shock.

"Me?" He asked, surprised and absolutely unconvincingly. "Never!" He waited a moment, but finally broke when Phil raised an eyebrow. "I was just kidding! I didn't want to scare him."

Phil grimaced as he glanced at the sleeping child.

"He wasn't scared. He was angry because I forbade him to fight Ranboo."

"Oh." The boy frowned. "But why? Okay, okay, okay!" He improved quickly. "I'll talk to him. Hey, Tommy!"

He grabbed the boy's arm, shaking him lightly, then, at the first sleepy grunt, dragging him toward the door.

"Don't run around-" Phil called after them, but he didn't have time to finish before Tommy, driven blindly in a very lopsided way, smacked his forehead against the doorframe. "Oh."

The child jumped back, still looking around with sleepy eyes, rubbing the sore spot with his free hand.

"I'm fine!" He exclaimed immediately. "I'm not asleep anymore!"

It was hard to judge whether Phil was more relieved, or whether he was seriously considering whether it would be easier if he had adopted a puppy instead of a child years ago.

"Can you really not hold out a minute without hurting yourself?"

Wilbur grinned, swaying carelessly on his heels.

"No," he replied with disarming glee, and Tommy immediately backed him eagerly.

Phil sighed, rubbing fingers over his forehead, but as he looked at the boys, both at once and then individually, his face softened and the corners of his mouth lifted slightly.

"You're lucky I have such a soft spot for you," he said, and there was certainly a lot of truth to it.

Techno was still all too well imagining what would happen to him for similar behavior in any of the previous houses. Sometimes he kept forgetting that he wasn't in any of them anymore. Sometimes he kept his distance, sometimes he was afraid to speak, sometimes he found himself tiptoeing and holding his breath as he passed Phil's office. Sometimes he would lock himself in his room all day and couldn't bring himself to open the door, too frightened by the utterly absurd vision of what he might find behind it.

Usually Phil was there to come to his aid. Sometimes discreetly, talking to Wilbur and distracting him, giving Techno a moment to calm down and adjust his breathing to the rhythm as his hand moved slowly up and down his back. Another time, more directly, when in the store he was taking headphones from his bag and putting them over his son's ears to cut him off at least a little from the overwhelming hustle and bustle. Whenever he left Techno's food at the door of his room, but always knocked, made sure everything was okay, and didn't

leave until he got a reply. As he sat down on the bed next to him and told him about a distant, cold country that only they knew, till Techno finally began to retell his part of the story. And then he used to cry because with Phil it was just hard to pretend sometimes.

He wanted to cry now, too, sitting at the kitchen table, his throat disturbingly lump and his eyes strangely moist.

He wanted it even more when Phil turned to study him closely.

"All right?"

"Yhm," he muttered, because what else could he say when he was okay, when nothing bad happened, when the last days were so quiet and only he couldn't enjoy them?

What was he going to say when he had his whole family right there, but somehow he still missed them so damn much? He missed how he could have Phil all to himself, how Wilbur would run over to him with every stupid idea, that it was his own Saturday mornings that Tommy had already appropriated for himself. He missed not feeling so bloody invisible and utterly redundant.

He couldn't say it. Not when he saw how hard Phil tries, how often he devotes whole days to them and stays late at the computer, how he constantly makes sure they don't need anything, how he remembers to cut Tommy's sandwich crusts, that Techno doesn't like butter and Wilbur will eat broccoli only hidden in chocolate cake. Two days earlier, Techno had found him sleeping on the couch at night, the book he had promised to read on his chest and a half-drunk mug of coffee in his hand.

He could not say that it's not enough. He couldn't ask for more. Not when he himself couldn't name what he suddenly lacked. Which was why he was so afraid of losing all the rest as well.

Phil, of course, wasn't fooled for a moment.

"Listen." He sat down in the chair next to him, covering his hand with his, and smiled apologetically. "I know I've had a little less time for you lately, but-"

Techno couldn't take it.

"It's okay," he interrupted quickly, taking his hand back a little too sharply. "Don't worry about it, really."

Phil frowned, clearly unconvinced.

"You're sure?" He ran his fingers through his hair. "You seem... sad."

"I'm sure."

"Sure-sure?"

"Yhm."

"Are you sure that you're sure?" He raised an eyebrow, and this time Techno let himself be approached and replied with a faint smile.

"'Sure' times infinity," he assured. "You don't need to worry."

Phil just shook his head.

"You're my son," he said, and Techno tried very hard to ignore the sudden contraction in the heart area. "I'll always worry. Even if you don't give me any reason, I'll always find one."

The boy made a long grunt as he stretched his arms out on the table top.

"What if I move out?"

"I'll worry if you're hungry."

"Well, I'll come for dinner sometimes."

"I'll start to worry that something will happen on your way."

Techno rolled his eyes.

"I'll win the lottery, buy the Arctic, and live in a log cabin in the middle of nowhere," he offered, and Phil immediately leaned in so that he could look into his eyes with mock seriousness.

"And will you remember to wear a scarf?"

They stared at each other for a moment, pretending they didn't want to laugh at all, before Techno gave up and turned his head with a soft snort. Phil joined him immediately.

"Well, that's better!" He rejoiced, ruffling his hair. "Now you can go ahead and help Wilbur in causing chaos."

He turned as he began to load the dishes into the sink, but glanced over his shoulder and apparently caught his son's expression as he hesitated. He poured water into the sink, rolled up his sleeves, and silently went to the plates, but he was tense, and when he spoke again after a moment, his voice was much less sure than it had been a moment before.

"Did you have a fight?" He asked, but didn't turn around anymore. Techno was sincerely grateful to him for this bit of privacy. He didn't trust himself to be able to keep a straight face.

"As if," he replied after a long moment, tracing the knots on the wooden table with his finger. "I agreed to play with them in that stupid country they talk about all the time. And they said I was to help them overthrow the government! So I helped!" He straightened, still genuinely indignant. "And they suddenly changed their mind and tried to start a new one!"

Phil nodded.

"Ah, I see..."

"It makes no sense! And I told them so. And they said that their government is good. And I say that every government says so, and that they just used me." He broke off hearing a significant grunt. "They betrayed me. And I got pissed off and kinda devastated it a bit, but what does it really matter if Wilbur blew it all up anyway?"

This time Phil turned, clearly interested, though far from keeping up with the developments.

"That's why he came to me with this stick-"

"With a sword."

"Sorry, with the sword to kill him?"

Techno waved his hand.

"No, it's precisely because he's crazy. And Schlatt had a stroke," he added thoughtfully.

Phil nodded slowly.

"I understand..."

He definitely didn't understand. Not that it mattered, the only thing he should focus on is undeniable harm and an absolute lack of justice.

"And now they're angry with me for wrecking their country. And Tommy said I ruined everything, and..." He hesitated, suddenly losing all his energy. "And Wilbur didn't protest."

Phil didn't answer right away. Techno wasn't surprised because, to tell you the truth, he didn't know what he wanted to hear right now.

He wanted his brother, loud, annoying and right where he should always be.

"You know..." Phil began, but his voice was hesitant. He put the glass down on the dryer and held his hands in the water for a long moment before reaching for another. "I can't decide for you," he said finally, slowly and thoughtfully. "And I won't be angry if you don't listen to me. But sometimes it's a good idea to hide your pride and just pretend it's okay."

He turned to gently run his hand over his son's cheek, leaving a damp trace on it. Techno instinctively wiped it off with his sleeve and stared at his hands, the long sleeves of his T-shirt reaching up to his elbows in the middle of summer. Sometimes he felt as if he had taken a deliberate step back. A step towards the scared boy, who had no idea what would happen to him this time, and prepared for anything just in case. A boy who knew no other outlet for his emotions than a scream, who was ashamed to cry in front of others, who refused to be attached so as not to miss anyone when he was once again rejected.

"I'm afraid you'll just stay like that," Wilbur had said. Techno himself was more scared than ever before.

He took a deep breath and held it for a moment before letting it out slowly.

"I'll try," he decided, pushing the chair away from the table. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Phil looking over his shoulder at him, smiling.

Tommy was fully awake now, judging by the fact that when Techno pushed the door to his room ajar, he was jumping from chair to bed. A skipping rope stretched across the center of the room, tied on one side to a wardrobe handle and on the other, crushed by books on a bookcase. Wilbur was just checking to make sure it could bear the weight of the blanket and barely glanced at his brother.

"Hi." He tossed the blanket over the makeshift construction and stepped back, pleased with the effect. He reached blindly backwards, and Tommy handed him a handful of buckles without any further prompting. "What do you want?"

Techno shrugged his shoulders. On the one hand he was fascinated by how the work on the new base was progressing, on the other...

He wasn't jealous. Not at all. Something just felt wrong in his chest. He probably had a heart attack, that's all.

"Nothing," he muttered, wrapping his arms around himself instinctively and then dropping his hands down so he wouldn't look as awkward as he actually felt. "I wanted to see what you guys were doing."

"We're rebuilding our country!" Tommy dived under the blanket, and when he stuck his head out from under it again, he stared at Techno with obvious resentment. "After someone smashed the old one..."

"You had it coming..." Techno grimaced, resisting the urge to define it in a more blunt way.

Wilbur must have sensed better not to pursue the subject, as he lightly slapped Tommy on the back of the head and seemed to telepathically echo the entire conversation with him, judging by the expressions they made to each other.

"It doesn't matter," he finally said as the child puffed up his cheeks and capitulated, offended. "Do you need something? Because we're a little busy. My son" he waved his hand towards the chair from which a teddy fox just flew "has had an existential crisis and doesn't want to know me. You raise one like that from a puppy, and then he takes offense because you became a terrorist, I swear..." He shook his head, immediately focusing on his brother again. "So?"

Techno shrugged. He hadn't expected to have to explain himself. He was almost certain that, with or without the country, Wilbur would be happy to see him. Meanwhile, with each passing second, he felt more and more like an intruder, and he didn't like it a bit.

"I wanted to hang out with you guys," he said finally, trying to sound as indifferent as possible, which was a bit difficult when Wilbur and Tommy exchanged glances immediately.

"You want to play with us?" The child made sure, and Wilbur bit his lip.

"Oh," he muttered, looking around the room. "But... Can you come back a little later?" He asked, rubbing his neck. "Because it really doesn't play well that you're here now..."

Techno would have been absolutely sure he had misheard if some soft little voice somewhere in the back of his head hadn't convinced him right from the start that this was how it would end. That nobody wants him, nobody needs him, that they do well without him...

"You don't like me here," he repeated involuntarily, too busy trying to understand the new, overwhelming feeling to have his voice completely in control.

Wilbur shook his head quickly.

"Well, not in that sense!" he assured, which sounded extremely artificial and only made matters worse. "You can sit with us! Just, well... It's gonna be less... canonical?"

Techno blinked.

"Less canonical," he said, and when two nods in harmony answered him, he swallowed hard through his tightly clenched throat. "Okay."

He turned and reached for the doorknob, completely ignoring his brother's voice.

"Hey, don't be offended right now!"

Techno wasn't offended at all. He wasn't even angry as he leapt three steps up the stairs. He felt nothing but tiredness and surprise, one of those he had no rights to, because nothing had happened that he hadn't foreseen before, nothing that voices hadn't been telling him for weeks. It's only his fault he didn't listen.

Phil had already dealt with most of the dishes and immediately turned his head at his footsteps.

"Oh. And how did it go?"

Techno didn't answer. Instead, he pushed the chair back with such strength that it overturned and he had to pick it up from the floor before he sat down at the table, dramatically hiding his face in his arms.

"Oh."

"They don't want me there," he muttered, and even to his own ears it sounded bloody pathetic. He spent the last months repeating over and over that he was no longer a child and getting angry every time someone hadn't treated him maturely enough, and now he was sitting in the kitchen and wanted to cry because his brother, apparently, found a better company to play with. He was jealous of building a stupid blanket base, of an imaginary country, of a six-year-old who had somehow managed to take his place. He never thought he could go so low.

Phil hummed understanding, though he probably didn't understand the seriousness of the situation at all.

"Should I talk to Wilbur?" He offered, but Techno immediately shook his head.

"No. It would be pathetic."

The sound of the water died down and after a while he felt hands on the back of his neck, gently brushing his hair back. He tilted his head a little instinctively to facilitate the work, but Phil made no attempt to braid his hair, instead running his fingers through the pink strands in a slow, calming rhythm. Techno found himself trying to adjust his breathing to it.

"You know," he heard after a moment, and hands for a moment slipped over his shoulders, squeezing them lightly. "It's probably not the same, but our country always needs you."

He knew it was meant to calm him down. And under any other circumstances, he probably would actually feel better knowing that even when he is cranky and capricious, he can still count on genuine consolation. But now that he could hear the footsteps upstairs and the soft double laughs, the thought of Phil being the only one willing to hang out with him was damn embarrassing.

He straightened, sliding a little lower in his chair.

"Yes, but... But I also wanted to play with them..." he muttered, and then tilted his head back. "Can we raid them?"

Phil laughed, ruffling his hair one last time before turning back again.

"We'll see what we can do."

Warm air poured in through the ajar door onto the terrace, the sun was shining on the floor in a long, bright beam, and Techno suddenly realized that it would be another full year since he tried to sneak out of the house with a far too heavy backpack and Steve slung over his arm. Sometimes he wondered how far he could actually go before Phil found him and brought him back. There was something special, warm and nice, in the certainty that he probably wouldn't have made it far.

"If I had said then that I still didn't want to stay with you after that month, would you have sent me back?" He asked once, mostly out of curiosity, but judging by his expression, Phil immediately found the question tricky.

He looked at his son closely, clearly searching for a hint of what kind of test he was undergoing this time, then finally closed his laptop and got up from the table to sit on the couch beside him.

"Do you want to hear the honest answer or the correct one?"

Techno thought about it, trying to guess what could be behind each of the variants.

"The first," he finally decided.

Phil smiled in strange sadness.

"No. I know I promised to honor your opinion. And you need to know that I still hold it. But you're my son. You were my son even back then. I couldn't just stop fighting for you."

Techno didn't understand. Mostly why Phil was acting like he had done something wrong.

"Good," he said, frowning. "That's good," he repeated as Phil blinked, then looked at him with that strange surge of affection. "I'm glad."

Phil shook his head, smiling completely sincere this time.

"Between us, I wouldn't really have had a choice. Wilbur probably wouldn't let me in if I tried to come back without you."

And Techno smiled back, because if he could be sure of something, it would be his brother.

He really wanted to be able to say the same now.

He stretched out his arms on the table, fingering the sleeves of his T-shirt.

"Do you think I'm boring?"

Phil turned his head to look at him in genuine amazement.

"No. Of course not. Why do you think so?"

He continued washing up, apparently wanting to finally get it over with before another very serious tragedy happened, but he kept looking over his shoulder, frowning as Techno rested his cheek on the table as well.

"Because I'm literally sitting and talking to you instead of playing upstairs."

In time, he realized that it sounded a little mean, but if Phil felt offended, he didn't show it. His mouth twitched in a smile, and even as he raised his eyebrows in an attempt to fake resentment, he sounded like he was having a lot more fun than he should have.

"Oh, in the sense that I'm boring?"

Techno clicked his tongue.

"Not 'boring'. *Old*," he clarified, and Phil froze for a second.

"Oh." He turned off the tap and slowly reached for a cloth to wipe his hands. "You have exactly three seconds to start running. One..."

Techno didn't need a second warning.

He had run out onto the terrace, hopping down onto the grass, and getting his socks into as much dirt as possible, before he felt strong arms wrap around his waist and lift him up, kicking his feet and thrashing in the attack of laughter. And maybe he had underestimated his

strength a little, and the fact that for a long time he had not been so small anymore, because after a while they both landed on the ground, Techno on his side, doubled over to protect himself from the tickles, Phil on his back, still pressing him against his chest.

"Not bad for some old man, huh?" He sneered while the boy struggled in his embrace.

"It's a death hug. One foot already in the grave!" He howled, kicking the grass. And then he could only try to catch his breath as his T-shirt rolled higher over his stomach and he suddenly became a much easier target.

In the end, Phil showed mercy to him, probably mostly to keep the neighbors from calling the police over the noise. Wilbur always joked that his brother's laughter sounded like killing a pig.

When Techno was little, he very quickly quit the idea that he would ever be comfortable around an adult. Well, to be more precise - the adults talked him out of it themselves. But Phil wasn't like any of them, and while it took far longer than you might think, as Techno grew up with him, he slowly realized that physical contact could be something other than a punishment.

Because sometimes Phil would just sit next to him and ruffle his hair for no reason at all. Sometimes he would lean over and kiss the top of his head just because Techno was close enough. Sometimes he would put a hand on his back or shoulder and pull him to his side, completely ignoring the fact that they were in a public place and that everyone around would now know that they were family.

Techno has not had too many people in their life willing to admit being related to him, let alone in this way.

"I'll miss it," he heard now, as he was busy shaking the dirt off his trouser legs. He turned his head just as Phil straightened, sitting next to him.

"Miss what?" He frowned, taken a little surprised by the affectionate but strangely sad look.

Phil just sighed heavily and for a moment he just stared at him, the same way he stared at their old photos sometimes.

"You. Being so small."

Techno frowned.

"I'm not small," he said, indignant, because hadn't he just given this perfect proof by knocking a grown man to the ground? Admittedly unintentionally and a bit by accident, but still!

Phil laughed slightly.

"Of course not," he sneered, but then he became visibly serious and his voice softened. "But sometimes I wish you would stay like this forever."

Techno bit his tongue at the last moment so as not to snarl 'And I don't!'

"Why?" He asked instead, so that no one could accuse him of never waiting for an explanation.

Phil hummed softly, thoughtfully.

"I like it when you're so... carefree," he explained, and Techno immediately felt stupid for his anger. "Happy, just like that. The older you get, the harder it is for me to find an easy way to make it."

The boy shifted, tilting his head so that he could meet his eyes.

"I'm getting picky," he said with a shrug. "You asked for this."

"I did. And I want to see you grow up. But maybe try to do it a little... slower?"

If Techno were to be completely honest, he would have to admit that he probably couldn't, even if he had the opportunity to do so. Not after counting down the days for years until he finally frees himself of everyone, of the system, of more horrible families, of the label of a stupid, aggressive child who can only cause problems.

He didn't want to say it out loud. Not at the moment when he felt really calm, really good, really at home.

"You're really talking like old people now," he sneered, and Phil made a very dramatic grunt.

"Nobody needs me anymore and I will die soon..." he muttered grimly, and although it was an obvious joke, Techno still felt an unpleasant twist in his stomach.

"Stop it," he grunted, then looked away, absolutely sure his face was turning a color very similar to his hair. "I'll always... need you a little, you know?"

He heard more than saw a broad, warm smile.

"I'm glad."

* * *

Wilbur didn't come into the living room until a good two hours later, wearing a blue paper hat, boots dug from the back of the closet, and a wooden sword attached to the waistband of his trousers. Techno wanted to make any remark about his outfit, but somehow couldn't get it. Not when he still felt hurt and he had just enough good will to not pull away when his brother jumped on the couch and sat cross-legged next to him.

"Hi." He prodded Techno with his heel as if nothing had happened. "What are you doing?"

Techno practically put his nose to the paper, lifting the book a little higher.

"I'm reading," he grunted, and then, before he could bite his tongue, added, "But don't worry, I'll make sure not to do it too 'canonically'."

Wilbur grimaced and opened his mouth immediately, but whatever he wanted to say was probably not a good option, because after a while he pressed his lips together. He swayed nervously, but he could never endure the tense atmosphere for long, especially the silence, so he took a deep breath and blurted out:

"I'm sorry. I just..." He shrunk his shoulders, and his hat fell a little lower on his forehead. "I was mean."

Techno had on the tip of his tongue 'Yes, you were' - he could almost taste the words, almost equal to the bitterness he had felt a few hours earlier. But then he looked up and his gaze met Wilbur's, and he suddenly realized that he didn't want to argue now. That he doesn't want to argue at all.

And that he doesn't like it at all.

It wasn't that he liked arguing, not really and not about important things. But whether the reason for the argument was more or less abstract, he always knew he could actually say what he was feeling. He can take offense, he can scream, he can call his brother a complete moron and hear the same thing in return. And then he can exchange a knowing look with him, mumble 'I'm sorry,' or throw a candy bar on his lap, and suddenly everything will be fine, as if nothing had happened.

Because Wilbur would always forgive him and that was obvious and didn't require any additional confirmation.

Until now. Because looking at his brother in the idiotic hat and shoes in which he had probably already sweated through his socks, Techno realized that he wasn't at all sure if the bond between them was still as strong and stable as it was before.

His fingers tightened a little tighter on the book, exhaling slowly.

"It's fine," he said, although he was very damn far from being 'fine'.

Wilbur must have noticed it, because he shook his head quickly.

"No, really, I'm sorry. I guess..." He hesitated, biting his lip before looking down at his hands. "I guess I got a little scared."

He said it so softly that at first Techno was sure he had misheard.

"Scared?" He repeated, putting the book down and turning to face his brother. "About what?"

Wilbur continued to stare at his hands, twisting his fingers into angles they should never have been.

"Because... Because you and Phil always have some secrets of yours," he muttered under his breath. "And you do a lot together and you tell each other everything and not that I'm jealous or anything, but, well..." He took a deep breath, shaking his head. "And when Tommy showed up, I thought maybe he'd be... only for me, you know? Like *my* special person. Because sometimes I think a little bit that I don't suit you two. And Tommy likes me and my music and he thinks I'm great. So I- I guess I was scared that you would take it from me, sort of."

Techno blinked, not sure what to focus on first. How did everything suddenly go this way? Why couldn't he just be angry with his brother and not immediately feel like the worst, most petty person in the world?

The worst part was knowing there was no way to deny it. Logically, he knew that Phil was always trying to devote as much time to them as each of them needed and trying to be close to them, that his relationship with each of his sons was slightly different, but always just as sincere and full of good intentions. But it would have sounded extremely idiotic after Techno had spent most of the afternoon with him. When it was him who Phil was looking at more closely, worrying more about, and sat by his bed in the evenings a little longer than usual.

He wouldn't call it favoritism. In fact, at times he felt more like a ticking bomb that must be guarded so that it does not explode on any jolt. But he had been on his own for a little too long to underestimate when someone was trying to protect him from himself.

Wilbur never said anything, never complained. He seemed as happy as ever and Techno was angry with himself for not noticing sooner. He was even more angry when he couldn't find the right words and the right answer. He wasn't even sure if Wilbur should be talking to him about it.

"I think you're great too," he muttered instead, and immediately felt like giving himself a hard kick.

Wilbur blinked, raised his eyebrows, then the broad grin of a Gremlin from the deepest depths of Hell crossed his face.

"What? I didn't hear you, repeat that, please," he asked innocently, leaning over to his brother, but Techno only smacked his forehead.

"Not a chance."

"Hey, come on. Say I'm great!"

"Great at pissing me off, that's what you are," he snorted, reaching for the book to pretend to be very busy, but before he could open it, there was a thud behind the stairs, as if someone was trying to pick up a piano.

"Wilbur!" Tommy jumped once more in the middle step, as if his voice alone wasn't loud enough. "Wilbur, you were supposed to be back soon!"

Techno frowned, already getting ready to tell the kid to fall off and not disturb while the adults were talking, but to his surprise Wilbur just groaned and rose from the couch.

"I'm coming... God, the man is not there for five minutes and it's like the end of the world..."

He leaned over the backrest to knock the book out of his brother's hands and give him a wry smile, then ran upstairs without a word, immediately starting to banter with Tommy.

Techno was left alone. And although he should feel better theoretically, it should be easier for him to think that his brother never wanted to hurt him, that he didn't do it on purpose... Somehow he couldn't.

Because, apologizing or not, Wilbur left him immediately as soon as Tommy showed up and didn't even ask if Techno was willing to join them.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo... Techno's relation with Wilbur is about to be... complicated, from now on.
Sorry not sorry! ͇_('ʘ)_/͇

Also, if you guys have any prompts for a fluff scenes, please give me some. I need them for later (much, much later...)

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Angst begins! Let's gooo!

(Also, the part about Karlnapity didn't age well... XD)

I worked at this with @Katricia!

"Sapnap and Quackity are dating Karl," Wilbur said over dinner, probably trying to distract Phil from the fact that he was just tossing all his broccoli on Tommy's plate.

Techno followed his fork's movements, getting more and more of an urge to stab him with it.

"Oh. Both at once?" Phil asked, glancing at his older son as if looking for support and prompts, but Techno only focused more on smearing potatoes on the plate. Not because he didn't want to help. He just didn't know, because he was neither there, nor was anyone willing to let him know. When he came downstairs in the morning neither his brother nor Tommy were home, and when he sent a message asking where the hell they had disappeared to, Wilbur didn't reply to him until an hour later. And even then, it wasn't an invitation to join them.

Phil was catching up on some project, which basically meant Techno had the whole house to himself, but, exceptionally, somehow he didn't know how to enjoy it. It was too quiet without the constant screams, the patter of feet, and the slamming of the door, too clean when no one left nibbled fruit and scattered crayons on the table, too safe without LEGO on the floor and shoes to trip over. Perhaps you really get used to some things completely unknowingly and against yourself.

And even when Wilbur and Tommy finally burst into the house, hungry and dirty as if they had spent a week in the wild, neither of them even took notice of Techno. Tommy only cared if there had been a letter in his absence, but everyone was already used to it.

"Tubbo has to write back to me!" He explained the first time.

"Oh." Phil looked as if he were seriously calculating whether more harm would be caused by a serious conversation or the delusion that in time the child would forget. In the end, he probably chose the latter to just stroke the boy's hair, smiling slightly. "I'm sorry, but nothing has come yet."

The boy's mouth curved down, but then he shook his head, smiling again.

"That's fine! It may take a while because Tubbo can't write."

Techno, listening to the whole conversation, slumped a little lower on the couch, almost hearing the rustle of a letter hidden among the books. Fortunately for him, no one noticed.

ANd now, as though he was showing offense in the most obvious way possible, Wilbur didn't even glance at him.

"Yhm," he nodded, his mouth full, surreptitiously wiping his fingers on the tablecloth, probably planning to blame Tommy later.

Phil raised his eyebrows.

"Does Karl know about this?"

"Sure. It was his idea. 'Cause they were arguing so much about him, so he said he could date both of them and now everyone's happy."

Techno wasn't the least bit surprised - Karl always looked like an unknowing victim of communist propaganda. But Phil, innocent and eternally optimistic, didn't seem to sense anything, for he stared at his son wide-eyed, surprised as if he had suddenly grown an extra head.

"That's, um..." He cleared his throat. "Very... nice of him."

"Right?" Wilbur, completely unfazed by his shock, just nodded. Then he frowned, as if he remembered something, and straightened, resting his elbows on the table and folding his hands together in the pose of a very serious businessman. "Ah. Exactly. So we decided you need to stop talking to Bad."

This time Phil looked completely indifferent. Apparently he had a limit of one emotional shock a day and he wasn't going to go over it.

"We"?

"Me and Sapnap. And Tommy agreed with us!"

The child, trying to hold the fork properly in his hand (he was doing better and better, especially considering how rarely he was persuaded to try at all) immediately jerked his head up and nodded eagerly, probably not even knowing what he was agreeing to.

"Oh." Phil looked from one boy to the other, the corners of his mouth twitching slightly. "And why?"

"Because when you two start to talk about something, then we're not allowed to do anything!" Wilbur spread his arms wide, as if indignant that he had to explain something so obvious. "And that's not fair!"

"We just exchange opinions."

"Your opinions are destroying our lives," he muttered, and Techno immediately nodded, fully agreeing with him. Even if, apparently, no one planned to ask him for his opinion.

Far too often he had gotten into trouble just because Sapnap had said something to his fathers. When Techno had a fight with Quackity and, quite by accident, knocked out his front tooth, they both agreed that they would avoid a lot of trouble if they just lie and blame the wrong distance between Quackity's face and the swingset. But, of course, Sapnap must have found it a brilliant anecdote over dinner, and Phil showed no admiration for their cooperation for the greater good.

"It wasn't a lie at all!" Techno didn't think to give up without a fight. "He really hit the swing with his teeth! Week earlier. But he did!" Phil frowned at him sternly, and suddenly all the arguments no longer seemed as brilliant as they had been a moment before. "Well... And they wanted to execute me! Because they said it's unfair, that I'm immortal, but that's bullshit, I can be whatever I want!" He crossed his arms, sliding a little lower on the couch. "Dream's practically some god and he has made himself some kind of split personality, or other shit, but no one tried to kill him."

Phil had listened to his complaints with a straight face, but couldn't hold it for much longer.

"Did you at least apologize?" He asked with a heavy sigh.

"He did. Several times." Wilbur put in, his mouth full of cereals. Amazingly, he was as willing to get his brother out of trouble as he was to throw him under the bus.. "He almost cried."

Techno felt that he was suddenly getting way too hot.

"Not at all!"

"Well, I saw it."

"That's 'cause- 'cause they took my bicycle! And I was afraid they would spoil it! That's the only reason."

Wilbur laughed, almost choking.

"Yeah, sure."

"You want to lose a tooth too?"

By some miracle, probably as a result of a force majeure in Phil, Wilbur had retained a complete set of teeth. Although in hindsight, sitting at the table and being completely ignored, Techno was beginning to seriously regret it. But he wasn't going to complain, oh no! It didn't bother him at all, and he didn't take it personally, and he didn't care that when they went out to the store the next day to buy a school kit, mostly for Tommy, Wilbur was still focusing solely on the gremlin.

"I'd love to have at least half their energy," Phil sighed, dropping into a chair at a nearby coffee shop, bags tossed casually on either side, and two children racing down the shopping alley. But it was still not enough for him, because he immediately looked at Techno, with the

concentration of studying the menu, and frowned. "All right, kiddo? You're really quiet today."

Techno had been quiet for exactly a week when he discovered that no one was listening to him anyway. But he wasn't going to dramatize.

"I'm okay," he muttered, just as Tommy pulled the last vacant chair as close as possible to his, set Henry down on it and set the menu up so the stuffed animal could see it too. Techno briefly considered reminding him that neither he nor the toy could read, but ultimately kept that comment to himself as a very serious, very mature man.

To prove this seriousness, he was the only one who asked for coffee instead of hot chocolate, and that might not have been the best idea he had ever had.

"You look like you're gonna throw up," Wilbur said and would have been kicked for that if Techno hadn't been so grown up and absolutely beyond his childish taunts.

But coffee, out of spite, didn't care about his adulthood, and it still tasted awful. Phil watched from beneath his raised eyebrow as he forced more sips into himself, then on the first occasion when the two younger boys were chasing each other around, he took his cup from his hand and without a word replaced it with his own, putting his finger to his mouth and blinking knowingly.

Techno forced himself to smile back. Sure, it was nice knowing at least one person in the family still remembered he existed, but no matter what, Phil could never replace Wilbur. Just like his efforts, no matter how sincere and full of good intentions, could not hide the fact that the atmosphere in the house is slowly beginning to change. That Wilbur spends his days with the younger boy more and more often, that they hang out in his room in the evening, loot the kitchen together at two in the morning, and invent strange games. He had even started to braid little pigtails just behind Tommy's ears, and Techno couldn't look at the boy now without an unpleasant twist somewhere in his stomach and a prickle around his heart. He was beginning to seriously fear that soon he would really get sick of it all.

"If you unlock the door and take a firm bend, chances are we'll get rid of both at once," he muttered, glancing back to where Wilbur and Tommy were arguing over a toy in the backseat and slowly beginning to move into a fight.

Phil chuckled softly, also peering in the mirror.

"I'm afraid the belts would save them," he whispered back. "Unfortunately..."

Techno also regretted it. What's the point of having a brother at all, since he's been feeling lonelier than ever lately? In addition, he had to be reminded of it at every turn, because Wilbur and Tommy, by some bloody miracle, were bending the rules of math and joining forces to achieve a volume level at least three times higher than either of them. And it looked as though they were just warming up before reaching their full potential.

"Yhm." Wilbur nodded expertly, studying the small scratch on Tommy's hand. "I see. Yeah. Unfortunately, it'll have to be amputated."

The boy's eyes widened in horror so much it would have been amusing if it had not heralded impending chaos.

"Ampu- What?" He squeaked, pressing a hand to its chest as if someone were already standing next to it with an ax.

"Cut off your arm." Wilbur, helpful as always, rushed to explain. "I'm sorry, really."

He wasn't sorry at all. And certainly not because everyone in the house was exposing themselves to hearing loss when Tommy's voice turned to a shriek.

"They can't do that!"

"But they'll have to."

"No!"

"Unfortunately. Life sucks, I know."

"No!" The boy's lips trembled, and tears welled up in his eyes. "Phiiiiil...! Phil, do something!"

Even taking a well-deserved scolding, Wilbur still looked as damned complacent and as far from remorse as possible.

"Well, he's just so easy to trick," he only said, rocking on his heels. "And it's so funny."

He was laughing much less a few hours later, when, during a scuffle, he accidentally kicked the child hard enough to push him off the couch.

"No, no, no... Don't cry," he pleaded desperately, covering the boy's mouth with his hand to stifle the rising sobs, his free hand hastily wiping his wet cheeks. "It's okay, right? It's okay, it's okay- Don't tell dad, okay? No need to tell dad. You can hit me back if you want!"

Techno was genuinely fed up with both of them, so much so that he was counting down not only the days, but even the hours until his return to school. He needed to get away from them for at least a few hours, he needed to get out of Phil's eyes, more and more concerned about his behavior, he needed to pretend everything was perfectly normal, as it was before.

And maybe deep, deep in his heart, he quietly hoped far away from Tommy, Wilbur would want to be his stupid little brother again.

So far, however, the last few sunny days were still waiting for him, and nothing indicated any changes.

"I'm taking Carl!" Wilbur announced, rushing into the room without asking, and without waiting for an answer, he already grabbed the handle to run out into the corridor.

Techno jerked his head up, turning in his chair.

"What? No!" He was indignant, and Wilbur froze in mid-motion before looking back at him with a long groan of disappointment.

"Come ooon..!"

Techno shook his head because really, he might have shared something sometimes, go ahead, but definitely not that way. He didn't like being put in front of a fait accompli, especially when it was about his stuff.

"You have your own bike."

Wilbur sighed very dramatically and leaned out on his heels, still holding on to the doorknob.

"Well, yeah, but in mine you can lower the saddle, so Tommy can take it and then I can take your-"

Techno blinked.

"You're taking Tommy?" He interjected, suddenly losing all the urge to argue.

"Well..." His brother had at least the decency to be embarrassed. "Yeah. Because Niki is taking Ranboo, so I wanted to... I mean, if you want to go with us, we'll figure something out, right? I just thought you wouldn't want to."

Techno really wanted to be angry. He wanted to growl very much that he didn't need to go anywhere with them, that he had a million better things to do and that he was having a great time in his own company, in peace and quiet. Or, on the contrary, say that yes, he would be very happy to go with them, if only to see Wilbur actually trying to get out of it and what other brilliant idea he would come up with.

But somehow he didn't have the energy for any of these things. He had no energy for anything, neither anger, nor regret, nor any other emotions. Even if he managed to recover them, it would be best if they would disappear immediately in the terrible, cold emptiness that was slowly building up inside him.

He looked his brother straight in the eye.

"You didn't ask," he said dryly, and Wilbur immediately looked away, his cheeks flushed slightly, and for a moment, for a few short seconds, he seemed to be going to do something, say something, explain himself in some way. But when he finally opened his mouth, no explanation came from it.

"Sooo... Can I...?" He twisted his hands anxiously.

And if Techno had any remaining hope before, it had just been brutally stripped of it.

He turned in the chair, placing his forearms on the table and resting his forehead against them.

"Do what you want."

Wilbur clearly breathed a sigh of relief.

"Okay, thanks. I'll take your helmet too, okay?" He asked, not really expecting an answer at all, and Techno pressed his face tighter into his sleeves, blinking quickly to hold back the tears. It was so stupid, so not worth crying... but they picked this helmet together, almost a year ago. He always had to pull the straps tighter or it would fall over his eyes, and Wilbur laughed that he looked like a turtle tucked in a shell. "Because Phil's gonna be pissed if the kid gets some sort of concussion."

He left the door ajar. He might as well pick up a hammer from the garage and finish Techno off himself, the effect would be similar. And probably five times less painful than getting up from the desk and closing the door in person when Tommy's laughter came from downstairs and Wilbur's voice tried to shout over him. Techno kept his hand on the doorknob for a long moment before he was able to release his fingers and in one smooth movement turn the key in the lock, which he hadn't used for a long, long time.

He wasn't sure if he was trying to cut himself off from the world more, or spare the rest of family contact with such a horrible, utterly useless person as he clearly was.

He didn't come downstairs until a few hours later when Phil called for him to help set the table. He looked tired from work, and while Techno was eager to just cuddle up to him and let him somehow find a magic solution to the problem, he limited himself to a fake smile. Anyway, even if he somehow managed to break his pride and the growing feeling that he deserved neither attention nor consolation, he probably wouldn't have had time to get either one or the other.

Wilbur burst into the house, carrying Tommy in his arms, all limbs clinging to him like a baby koala in a tree. It was an accurate comparison because the boy had a red, teary face and slurped his nose loudly, as if he was watching the destruction of his ecosystem live.

"He fell off his bike," Wilbur explained, handing the kid to Phil and following him into the kitchen as if he had to personally supervise.

"I told you not to ride these dirt tracks," Phil scolded both of them as he sat the boy on the kitchen table and studied his scuffed knees and elbows. "Tommy can barely keep the steering wheel straight."

Predictably, the child immediately tried to take offense, but the hiccups prevented him from making an appropriate face.

"I'm keeping it super straight!" He exclaimed pleasantly. "And I ride super straight and I'm all very straight too!"

Phil smiled to himself.

"We'll talk about it in a few years, okay? Wilbur, bring me some plasters, please."

Wilbur immediately jumped up to do as he was instructed to do, but still glancing over his shoulder at Tommy. He also held his hand as the boy grimaced as he let the gash on his knee

be cleaned, and was the first to praise him for being very brave.

Techno wanted to scream.

(Maybe then someone would remember he existed.)

"Come on, it's okay now." Phil stuck the last colored patch on his scarred elbow, smiled reassuringly, and bent a little playfully to kiss the cut. "It'll heal before you know it."

Tommy watched him, eyes wide, his free hand rubbing his cheeks.

"What have you done?" He asked, trying to twist his hand as if he expected to see ancient runes and traces of ancient magic on it.

"Oh." Phil blinked, perhaps a little baffled at his surprise. "It's just a... a tradition? That if someone kisses a cut, it will heal faster."

Perhaps he should have chosen his words a bit differently, or at least added that kissing in no real way refuted the laws of biology, because Tommy's eyes flashed and he inhaled loudly, clearly captivated by the discovery of alternative medicine.

"Can you do it here too?" He asked, holding up his hand. Phil looked at her, carefully running his fingers over the old pale scar.

"Still hurts?" He asked, and even if he had not complied with the request immediately afterwards, the very affectionate tone alone would have counted as medicine.

The child shifted uneasily, frowning as he thought deeply about something.

"Sometimes." Finally he nodded. Then he raised his fingers to his temples. "But... here?"

Phil's face turned serious.

"Oh. It reminds you of sad things?" He made sure, and the boy immediately nodded, happy that someone did understand.

"Yes!" He rejoiced and immediately reported to the magic ritual another small scar on his forearm. "And here!" And then another one on the left side. "And here too! And-!"

He didn't have time to finish before Phil scooped him into his arms, twirling him in the air.

"I'll just eat you all right away!" He joked, kissing his temple while the boy, laughing and squealing, tried to break free from his embrace. "You'll be like new right away. What do you think?"

The baby squealed even louder if possible.

"No! Wiiiil...!" He swung his legs, stretching his arms towards the older boy. "Wil, Wil, do something!"

Wilbur spread his arms helplessly.

"Nope. I'm not messing with Phil's magic. I'm sorry, you're on your own."

Techno was, too. Even though he was standing in the doorway, staring at his family, he didn't feel like a part of it at all, neither at that moment nor at lunch, when Tommy was trying to eat with a fork in race with Wilbur and he would get absolutely everywhere, just not in his mouth, or afterwards helping to carry the plates off the table. When he was in the room, he twisted the key with a familiar click and almost hoped someone would try to open it.

Nobody tried.

* * *

Techno has come to terms with the fact that he will not find a way to get himself back into his brother's favor. Not when he didn't completely understand what and when he had done wrong, and Tommy was still on hand, ready to drag Wilbur further and further each day. He wasn't even surprised that he had spent the last two days of his vacation practically never leaving his room, pretending to himself that he was actually reading, not listening to sounds from below, that he was watching a movie and remembered what happened two scenes earlier, that he was playing games and only by complete accident he dies every now and then, because his thoughts are far away, and the fingers move much too slowly on the keyboard.

He was not at all sad. Not at all. He didn't care. He was just tired of going back to school, a million tasks and stupid tests, that's all.

And it absolutely didn't console him that the long list of causes of bad mood must include babysitting.

"Where's Wilbur?" Tommy asked, hopping onto the couch next to him and immediately moving even closer so that no one would accidentally think he had the least bit of respect for personal space.

Techno pressed his lips together tightly.

"He went with Phil," he grunted, perhaps a bit too aggressively. "You would know if you listened instead of making a scene."

Tommy straightened up immediately, puffing up his cheeks.

"I wasn't making a scene!" He said indignantly, though his face was still flushed after he had been picking on Phil for a good ten minutes, not wanting to let him out of the house.

Recently they have managed to come to a kind of compromise. Throughout the day, Tommy said he understood, calmly accepted what Phil was leaving for and for how long, and learned

to show on his watch when he would be back. Then, before the fait accompli, he played out the loudest scene of abandoning in the forest that Techno had ever seen in his life, then shutting himself up in his room to cry another ten minutes and re-appear almost as if nothing had happened.

Techno was sure Phil would lose several months of his life each time he did so. And some sanity, since he still called it 'progress'.

He tried to focus on the book, but the gremlin leaned in to peer over his shoulder, so quite instinctively he closed the book with a loud snap. Tommy jumped back, but didn't look disheartened.

"And where did they go?"

"Take Wilbur to therapy. Seriously, do you have any ear problems?"

The boy puffed up his cheeks.

"I don't," he grunted, but then it tilted its head, his eyes flashing with curiosity. "What's therapy?"

Techno was seriously considering asking Phil to hire a real nanny next time. He could even pay for it from pocket money.

"It's... When you meet a therapist to talk about your problems."

Tommy tilted his head the other way.

"Who's a therapist?"

"Someone you pay to listen to you. How they should pay me to put up with you."

The boy lay down on his back, stretching his legs along the backrest.

"And Phil listens to me for free," he said, which was not true, since every thinking creature was paying for the time spent with him with the loss of his will to live and the death of a few gray cells.

"Phil's different."

Tommy slumped a little lower on the couch.

"Why?"

"Go bother someone else, huh?"

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to look at you."

"Why?"

Techno looked at him, dangling head down and hair practically touching the floor. He had read once that you could even die from staying in this position for a long time, but he doubted that fate would be so kind.

"Because you're annoying. Go! Now!" He waved his hand in front of his eyes.

As predicted, Tommy didn't care a bit about it.

"Do you also go to therapy?" He asked, sliding completely to the floor and then scrambling back onto the couch to repeat the game. He completely ignored how tightly the older boy's arms were tightened, and his jaw clenched almost painfully.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I don't need it."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not crazy," he growled first, and immediately regretted it very much as Tommy sat up abruptly, eyes wide.

"And Wilbur is?"

Damn it.

"No, and if someone says that about him, bite him," he instructed, trying to sound as serious as ever. "Wilbur is... Wilbur's different."

The boy nodded, then thought for a moment, and this time shook his head.

"I don't understand," he murmured, wrinkling his nose. "You're explaining stupidly."

This time, it was quite right. Which didn't mean Techno would admit it out loud.

"You're stupid yourself," he grunted instead, very mature as ever.

"Not at all!"

"Yes you are!"

"No!" Tommy jumped to his feet, standing on the couch, towering over him. "Wilbur said I shouldn't listen to you at all!"

Techno rolled his eyes.

"That's what he said?" He snorted, although somewhere deep in his heart he already felt a twinge of anxiety. But even if Wilbur was angry with him, even if Techno did something he couldn't remember, which hurt him a lot, even if he didn't want to spend time with him right now, he would never...

"Yes!" Tommy jumped up, pointing his finger at him. "Because you're mean for no reason and you say mean things and then everyone's sad!"

Techno felt as if someone was slapping him on the cheek. Strong, by surprise, one of those that leave a mark and the skin burns for an exceptionally long time.

"Wilbur said that?" He made sure, though even in his own ears his voice sounded strange, low and trembling. He didn't want to cry, he couldn't cry, not now, not when Tommy was still there, staring at him in surprise.

"He did," he nodded, because apparently one blow is not enough. And then he must have sensed how the atmosphere changed, because he quickly returned: "But only once! And then never again!"

Techno didn't care if it was once or a thousand times. He didn't care if Wilbur really meant it, and whether he said it deliberately or out of anger and quite by accident. He didn't even care that it was true, and it was just a statement of the obvious.

Wilbur was his brother, his best friend, one of two people Techno trusted and believed no matter what. If even he thought that way, if even he said so...

He knew it was his fault and he deserved it himself. Sooner or later it had to happen, everyone had to lose patience with him, understand that he's not worth all this effort, all the sacrifices. Phil once said that he would always fight for him and Techno wanted so badly, needed so badly to hear it, that for a moment he really believed that he might be worth the fight.

"Techno?"

He felt a hand on his shoulder and flinched, instinctively pushing it away. Tommy staggered and took a step back, trying to get his balance before slapping the couch. It didn't even hurt him, however, and he rolled over onto his stomach, on all fours, moving even closer than before.

"Techno, don't cry," he asked, his chin quivering as if he himself was close to tears. "Techno, please don't be sad..."

Techno's hands tightened on the book he could barely see. He wanted to tell the child to shut up, but his throat was tight, his lips trembled, and he was too afraid that if he spoke once, the words would scream immediately and he wouldn't be able to stop.

And then he felt a small hand carefully stroking his hair, and suddenly the first tears fell on the book, smearing the ink, and a loud, torn sob came out of his throat and he just wanted to be alone, let the whole world disappear, let everyone leave him alone.

"Don't touch me," he growled, jumping up from the couch, gasping for breath and blinking back tears. "Leave me alone, do you hear? Leave me alone once and for all!"

Tommy stepped back, hugging his shoulders.

"But-"

"Get the fuck off me!" He screamed, and the boy flinched, holding up his hands. A pair of large, frightened eyes stared at Techno from behind lean forearms. "Stop bothering me at last! Can you do it at all? Can you not be so fucking annoying for two seconds?" The child nodded, quickly and clearly more fear than consent, and Techno felt the first wave of anger fade within him as soon as it appeared. "And if you tell anyone that... If you tell I cried, I swear that..."

He wasn't sure how to finish the sentence. But he probably didn't have to, because even without it, Tommy looked as if, having the choice between releasing a secret or dying, he found the latter option less painful.

"I won't," he promised, sniffing. He still struggled with the rising tears, but Techno didn't wait to see if he would finally break. He ran upstairs and slammed the door before lunging onto the bed, pressing the pillow tightly against his face to muffle a scream.

Part of him knew he should do something, he should help, cheer him up somehow, because Tommy was smaller, weaker and scared and needed a protector just like he did years ago. But the second voice, the louder one he was used to, knew perfectly well that Techno was never suitable for the role. Techno wasn't made to save anyone. Not when the only thing he knew was hurting everyone around him.

He remembered the first time he got into trouble at the new school. Apparently, he was unable to exist beyond the label of a 'problem child' because it took him less than two weeks. Although this time he really thought it was very unfair. He didn't do anything on purpose! He hadn't planned the whole day so that everything was as terrible as possible - the lights too bright, the chairs too hard, and the hustle and bustle in the corridor too deafening. He hadn't planned to be angry and resentful because his biology test had gone worse than he had anticipated, or that Wilbur would get on his nerves early this morning, and he certainly hadn't planned to get a ball in the head halfway across the school yard.

He hardly remembered it! All he could remember was the thump in the back of his head and the rushing of blood in his ears and the rapid pounding of his heart and how his breath burned his throat as he tried to gasp, and everything in him screamed that he should run, run, run, run away, hide somewhere and pray that they wouldn't find him, to not hear heavy footsteps on the wooden panels, to not see a shadow falling through a crack above the floor, to not let the lock screech, to not let the wardrobe door creak, to not...

Then someone touched his shoulder.

The boy probably had good intentions and Techno really felt bad that he probably broke his nose. But he still felt it wasn't his fault, and punishing him for something over which he had no control was more than unfair.

Interestingly, Phil felt the same way and made a fuss at school enough to suddenly turn a week's suspension into two days. But it was hard to enjoy it when he insisted on enrolling his son in therapy and refusing to take "No" as an answer. This was perhaps the first time Phil had actually forced him to do something, rather than asking and negotiating patiently, so

while Techno might still just refuse to get into the car, if only for sheer stubbornness and for stupid satisfaction, he decided not to cross the line anymore. Not when he could just keep silent meaningfully.

He didn't say a word to Puffy. Whatever topic she was trying to bring up, he kept his mouth shut and looked everywhere but at her. He didn't care that he was being mean - it was also unpleasant to make him do it all, so he just got even.

Phil gave in two months later. When Techno returned home after the eighth, already completely silent meeting, and locked himself in his room to continue to manifest how much everyone is terrible to him and how much he hates the world, he almost immediately heard a soft, uncertain knock on the door.

"I can't convince you, can I?" Phil sat down next to him on the bed, and although his closeness was usually reassuring, at the moment Techno was angry and offended and he really wanted everyone to feel as unhappy as he was, so he moved away.

If he had been less self-centered, he would probably have regretted it immediately, because even though Phil didn't say anything, it was obvious that he was hurt. For the time being, however, it didn't make any impression on him. For the time being, this was exactly his goal and he didn't plan to change for the better. If everyone insisted that he needed therapy, go ahead - he will act exactly as if he needed it very much, and maybe then they would graciously appreciate the difference.

"I don't want to go there," he grunted, drawing his knees up to his chin. Instinctively, he reached his hand to his hair, but hesitated as he remembered how much Phil hated it when he did it. Something about being nice to yourself and your body, which sounded wise and made sense, but since he obviously wasn't smart enough and didn't understand anything, then go ahead, that's what he's going to do!

"Techno, listen." Phil reached out as he tugged a lock of hair particularly hard, but ultimately thought it would only make matters worse. A very correct decision. "It's okay to admit that you're not coping with something-"

"You never cope with anything, and somehow no one pulls you into stupid therapy!"

This time, even in spite of all his anger, he really regretted speaking and immediately covered his mouth as if that would stop his next words. Or undo those already spoken.

Phil didn't yell at him. He hadn't called him horrible or ungrateful, and he didn't even look for a second as though he'd thought of hitting him. And maybe he should. Part of Techno wanted him to do it. He would have felt a little better then, a little relieved of guilt and a little justified. Kinda as if he had any reason to be so mean.

His previous homes had one unquestionable advantage - it was easy to find a reason to be angry. It was easy to repay everyone and to treat them exactly as they treated him, it was easy to mask despair with anger, it was easy to take pain out on people and not feel guilty. Living in Phil's house, he realized there was virtually no reason to feel so terrible, no reason to wake up in the morning and know in advance that the whole day would be just a nightmare, to

snarl at Wilbur over breakfast, to say malicious things, to intentionally hurt everyone around you. There was no reason to be angry - and yet he was angry. He was so goddamn angry and didn't want to hear about it not being his fault when everything in his life was always his fault, of course it was his fault because he was terrible and he deserved nothing better.

And Phil didn't deserve to be bothered with him.

But for some reason he wanted to. And even now, showing how hurt he was, he forced a faint smile.

"I'm in therapy," he said, as calmly as if he wanted to transfer some of his composure onto him. "Because I have two children at home, who sometimes I don't understand at all, and I have to learn how to help them." He reached out and this time the boy allowed him to pull his hand away from his hair and lock him in a firm, confident embrace. "Because sometimes I just run out of ideas."

Techno tried very hard to avoid his eyesight, but it was extremely difficult because everyone in his posture, his warmth, his tender touch, drew him closer. A few months ago, he was mentally calling Phil as damn flypaper and treating it as a threat, but now... Now Phil was just Phil. And he hugged him even when he didn't deserve it.

It took Techno exactly a second to return the hug.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, too embarrassed to say it louder. But Phil heard it anyway, and he hummed, resting his chin on the top of his head.

"I know," he sighed, stroking his back. Sometimes he would still write out different words on it, especially in the evenings, when Techno was having an extremely bad day and he was unable to calm down for a long time. He knew his intention was to try to fall asleep while doing it, but Phil always ended up with "I love you," and he didn't want to miss it. "But, Techno... We're your family. And we will always love you, no matter what you say or do. We know you and we know you didn't mean to hurt anyone". He hesitated, and his hand froze for a moment. "But I'm afraid that others won't be so understanding. I don't want you to be completely alone one day."

Perhaps it was just his imagination, but he could have sworn he hugged him a little tighter, as if that would protect him from the whole world, and especially from himself. Techno's hands tightened on his shoulders.

"I don't need other people," he grunted, but once after that, he looked up anxiously. "But I have you, right? And Wilbur?"

Phil leaned in to kiss his forehead.

"Of course," he said, and the boy's shoulders relaxed a bit.

"I'm really sorry," he muttered, this time trying not to look away to prove that he really was. "For what I said. At school, too, but... But more for what I said to you. I don't think that."

Phil laughed shortly.

"I can't cope more often than I should. That's kinda true. But it's okay. I'm not angry."

Techno frowned.

"But I made you sad."

"A little. It does happen sometimes."

More often than it should, he thought, stepping back to wipe his eyes surreptitiously.

"Tell me a story," he asked, and immediately heard a long, slightly too dramatic sigh.

"You know my imagination has its limits?"

"I don't care. I want to finally kill that dragon."

It was nice to sit on the bed and listen to the stories being told quietly, feel Phil wrapping the blanket around him like a cape, and then when things got hazy and sleepier, he kissed him on the top of his head and stroked his hair one last time. It was nice to believe that this moment could last longer, that it could always be so good, that *he* could be good. For his family, for friends, and maybe even for himself.

But kind words never lasted long. Kind words soothed him, but they could never soothe all the anger that was slumbering somewhere deep where he himself was afraid to look. Sometimes Techno had the feeling that he consisted only of anger, that he was a load that only needed a small spark to destroy everything around and leave nothing but rubble. And he could have sworn that sometimes, when he looked into Phil's eyes, he could see the same fear and doubt in them.

So maybe it just shouldn't be his. Maybe he wasn't made for nice words and tender gestures, for bedtime stories and kisses that heal every wound, and for falling asleep as safe as possible. Maybe the people were right to treat him as if he were nothing and he didn't deserve any bit of goodness. Maybe they were right to push him away again and again. Maybe they knew from the beginning that he was a bad person and nothing would ever change that.

He couldn't remember exactly when Phil and Wilbur returned home. He remembered the soft knocking on the door and that he had been lying motionless for a long time, pretending to be asleep, before his eyelids actually began to weigh heavily, and he fell asleep, tired of crying and helplessness.

He dreamed that he was wandering through a cold, ice-bound desert, and although he could see only snow all around him, pushed by a sharp wind from one pile to another, he was constantly tormented by a feeling that he had to find something, that something or someone was waiting for him, somewhere far away beyond the horizon.

But no matter how fast he ran, his legs sank deeper into the snow, his clothes soaked with water and stiffened in the cold, and the sky darkened until a dark, deafeningly silent night fell.

And even if there was light on the horizon, he would no longer have the strength to chase it.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Hi! I worked at this with @Katricia! Pog!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno didn't think he would have ever guessed it, but he learned two very important things in the first week of school.

First, the problem wasn't Tommy's presence. The problem was, Wilbur didn't want to talk to him, no matter how far they were from the child. Techno had no evidence that the boy repeated anything that had happened between them that night, but, to tell you the truth, he didn't need any evidence at all. The way Wilbur had stared at him since then, with resentment and anger and some form of challenge, as if he wanted a confrontation, was quite enough for him.

Second, and only slightly less painful: apparently all of Techno's friends were in fact his brother's friends, putting up with his company out of sheer courtesy. It wasn't that anyone was suddenly rude or making any kind of stupid comments. Karl followed him throughout the break, asking about what he did during the summer vacation, Schlatt asked if he had any plans for later, and Quackity sat down on the bench with him after Wilbur had changed seats without a word of explanation. But Karl was absolutely nice to everyone, Schlatt just wanted him to guard the bathroom door when he was choking on nicotine, and Quackity wanted a seat as close to his 'boyfriends' as possible after he lost to Sapnap in rock paper scissors. Two days later it became obvious that without the loud, lively presence of Wilbur, Techno was almost invisible against the gray background of the school. That if his brother didn't invite him to a table in the cafeteria, no one else would, if he didn't invite him to play, no one would even glance at him.

"I was sure you went with everyone," Phil said, wrapping his jacket around his son after Techno had spent a good hour sitting in the rain at the bus stop, all alone and increasingly confused, before he finally decided to just call. "Wilbur said this morning everyone went to Eret's after school, I thought you were too. If I had known, I would have come for you as usual." He turned, taking the opportunity of them stopping at the traffic light to look at his son with a mixture of concern and compassion. "I'm really sorry, I should have asked. You didn't want to go?"

Techno shrugged, pulling his dry, pleasantly warm jacket up to his chin.

"Mhm," he muttered, staring at the drops running down the glass. It wasn't quite a lie - if Wilbur had ever asked him, he probably wouldn't have been in the mood to go anywhere. Not when he was clearly not welcome. "Something like that."

The only person who still remembered his existence and willingly wanted to associate with him was Dream. Techno still wasn't sure if he should be happy about it.

"What's the matter with you two?" Asked the boy, his mouth full of a sandwich that had no right to appear as if it was made by a world-famous chef. "Did you have a fight or what?" He nodded to Wilbur, seated a few tables away. "He looks at you like you killed his family. Something happened?"

Techno appreciated his care. He was much less appreciative of the fact that the question had triggered an avalanche of frustration and unspoken grievances, which he had worked very hard to keep in check.

"It's okay," he muttered, shrugging, casually turning his own sandwich in his hands. He looked up for a moment, instinctively checking if Wilbur was eating his own, but then remembered that his care was neither needed nor welcome at the moment. "I just... I don't know. He's not talking to me lately. And he only cares about Tommy."

Dream nodded understandingly.

"Ah. Yeah, got it. My parents were as crazy when Drista was born. Something that she's small and needs attention and stuff." He waved his hand, making a face as if he still had a very strong grudge against it. "And they always admired her, and said how sweet and adorable she is. But then she started talking, and they quickly changed their minds."

Techno frowned, tossing the sandwich back into the box a bit too abruptly for it to survive in one piece.

"But Tommy's not my brother," he reminded emphatically. "And he's not that small. At his age, I was washing my own clothes. Manually."

Dream raised his eyebrows.

"You couldn't put it in the laundry?"

Sometimes Techno really wondered how he fell so low. Which decision led him to this point and made him confide in this man of all the people in the world.

"Somehow I didn't think about it, you know?" He sighed, not having the strength to hammer on common sense buried under a thick layer of luxury.

Dream shrugged.

"Well, that's on you," he said, then thought deeply about something. "How old is he anyway? Four? Five?"

"Same age as Drista," he replied, and while his friend was still looking at him expectantly, he sighed a second time. "Six."

"Really? He's kinda short. But you can cut his hair anyway."

Techno blinked.

"What?"

"Cut his hair." Dream as if nothing had happened, he was still chewing his sandwich. "I did it once. But I don't recommend it, my parents were really dramatic about it."

Techno decided to pretend he didn't hear it. Even if the idea seemed more and more tempting as Wilbur completely ignored him when all four of them were playing board games in the evening.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Phil asked softly, keeping him in the living room a moment longer. He had a serious face, but his eyesight was so sad and full of concern that Techno just couldn't lie to him again.

"I don't know," he admitted, staring at the floor and pulling his sweatshirt sleeves tight. "I guess... I guess not."

He heard a familiar grunt, and suddenly Phil knelt down in front of him, carefully pushing his hair back behind his ears. His hands were bigger and rough, but the memory of Tommy's touch still lingered in the Techno consciousness very firmly, ready to torment him at every opportunity.

He deserved it. He deserved everything that happened and had no right to expect sympathy.

"I can handle it," he said dryly, taking Phil's hand away from his temple.

"I can talk to-"

"No!" Techno cut in on his word and immediately fell silent, glancing quickly towards the stairs. "No," he repeated much, much more quietly. "It would only make things worse. Please don't do anything. I can handle it myself."

Because you've been doing so well so far, one voice mocked. Techno's fingers tightened on his sleeves.

Phil looked at him closely and clearly wasn't thrilled with what he saw. But it didn't matter, because the most important thing was that finally, after a long moment of heavy silence, he nodded.

"All right. But promise me that you'll tell me if something bad happens."

Techno wanted to say it was already happening. That he can't cope anymore, he can't sleep anymore, because he's constantly tormented by the same dream in which he always freezes to death in the middle of nowhere.

But he didn't deserve anyone trying to understand, so he just nodded.

Phil had a lot on his mind anyway, he didn't need any additional problems. Especially now that Tommy's first delight at school has faded and it has become obvious that he can't sit still

in his entire lesson, let alone focus on anything.

"But it's boring," he moaned every day as Phil made him do homework after dinner. "Boring and stupid and I don't need it at all. And there's no Tubbo!"

He stared at the letters which should be stretched across the width of the page, but he still didn't even touch the pencil.

"If you learn to write, you can send a letter to Tubbo," Phil offered, apparently very desperate. Or maybe just fucking tired. Dark circles under his eyes were starting to become a permanent part of his appearance, even on weekends. "A real one."

Tommy wrinkled his nose.

"Tubbo can't read."

"He will learn at school, just as you."

"He won't."

Phil blinked at his firmness.

"Why?"

The child looked at him as if he did not believe the enormity of his stupidity.

"Because I won't learn to write, so there will be no need for him to."

Faced with such strong logic, Phil proved surprisingly helpless. Techno had long believed that he and Wilbur had inadvertently got him a bit too used to the fact that everything must have a deep, most likely traumatic ground, and he just wasn't used to the power of childish stubbornness, laziness, and resistance to knowledge.

The only positive news was that Tommy was making friends very quickly. Not among the teachers, of course, but most of his peers, apparently, weren't disturbed by his hyperactivity. Techno was genuinely happy about it, deep down hoping that the child would soon find new company and leave Wilbur alone for a while. He quickly changed his mind, however, when Niki came to visit, with Ranboo tucked behind her legs and clinging tightly to her dress.

Under normal circumstances, Techno would be ashamed to even admit that playing with a six-year-old is at the moment the pinnacle of his dreams. But he was really desperate, and he needed at least a little normality, anything that would give him hope that the whole universe wasn't trying to erase all traces of his existence after all.

"Hey," he said as the boy took off his coat in the hall and set his shoes perfectly evenly against the wall, right next to Tommy's carelessly thrown sneaker. He knows where. "Want to... watch a movie, maybe?"

He fell low, very, very low.

And he was about to drop even lower, because the boy's eyes widened, he stared at him in amazement for a moment, and then he shook his head uncertainly.

"But I..." he stammered, glancing at his sister for help. "Can I go play with Tommy?"

Techno would love to be able to say that he didn't feel bloody betrayed. Neither then, nor two hours later, when Tommy himself burst into the kitchen, just when he was trying very hard not to think about anything unpleasant, not with a knife in his hand.

"Look!" He held up his hands, wiggling his fingers. "Niki painted my nails! And now I'm pink too!"

Techno cut the carrot with such aggression that Phil glanced at him anxiously, then turned his attention back to the kid.

"Very nice. But I'm afraid you'll have to wash them off. Your teachers probably wouldn't like them."

Tommy puffed his cheeks and took a deep breath, clearly getting ready for a long fight. Techno really felt sorry for Phil, who from the start looked as tired as he was resigned to his fate. But he didn't know any way to help, so instead he concentrated on at least not causing him any more worries, pretending nothing had happened, and finishing chopping the vegetables. Maybe at least he was supposed to be good at that.

* * *

He was woken up by thunder.

In fact, waking was a bit exaggerated, for he'd been spending the last few nights staring at the ceiling before finally falling asleep out of sheer exhaustion just before the alarm clock went off. But his thoughts were certainly very far away, and the bang outside the window brought him back to reality in a very brutal way. He sprang to his feet, sitting on the bed, just in time for another flash to illuminate his face, giving him a second to press hands to his ears.

Techno hated storms. He hated the sound of the rain hitting the windows, he hated the thunder, he hated the childish, utterly irrational fear that no matter that he was in a safe, warm house, lightning would somehow find a way to him. When he was eight, his foster mother disliked the fact that he was still hiding under the covers and shuddering every time the sky darkened and the downpour took on a much louder form. She called it 'confrontation with fear'. Or, less scientifically, 'Stop the fucking crying and move on before I give you a real reason to cry!', as she dragged him by the arm through the house and then pushed him out onto the wet terrace. The main thing Techno remembered was the piercing wind, that his pajamas were soaked with water in less than a minute, and that when he huddled in front of the door, squeezing his eyelids shut and covering his ears with his hands, the roar of the thunder seemed a million times louder than when he could at least put his head under a pillow. He hadn't spent more than twenty minutes outside, he was shouting too loudly, and

one of the neighbors might eventually have called the police, but it lasted for hours in his mind and was very effective at teaching him never to admit his fear.

So when Phil asked for the first time, more than two years ago, if he was afraid of the storm, Techno completely refused. In fact, he probably even took a little offense at this suggestion, because he didn't look anxiously out the window, at the dark clouds obscuring the sky, didn't breathe a little faster when the first raindrops hit, and didn't jump in his chair when the first rumble sounded in the distance. At all. Not a bit. But maybe something in his behavior gave the absolutely unnecessary illusion that he was dying internally of fear, because when he flinched again, Phil frowned, got up from the table, and stretched.

"It's rather nothing serious," he said, looking out the window. "But at night, there may be a shortage of electricity for a while." He looked up as if the lamp was about to decide for itself whether it would like to work in harsh conditions or not, then grinned. "How about camping in the living room? All three of us?" He looked from boy to boy. "You can make your 'fort' and we'll take flashlights, just in case, so neither of you kill yourself on the way to the bathroom."

Wilbur sucked in a breath, immediately leaping to his feet and racing towards the closet for blankets, radiating excitement. Techno watched him go before he glanced uncertainly at Phil. Neither of them had to say anything for the boy's shoulders to relax and relief to appear on his face.

Still, he couldn't sleep, even with his brother's arms around him in a light, sleepy embrace and Phil right next to him. The storm was not planning to subside at all, and even though the thunder happened less and less, Techno still shuddered against each one, huddling tighter under the blankets.

"Hey, kiddo." He felt a hand on his shoulder, and for one terrible moment he was sure that he had done something wrong, that he was too loud, that he showed how afraid he was and that someone would try to use it against him. But when he jerked his head up, all he saw was a familiar, concerned face. "Hey, hey, come on, take it easy." Phil stroked his back, completely oblivious to how sweaty he was. "It's just me. Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Techno shook his head so fast his own braid slapped his nose.

"I'm not scared," he said, his voice trembling, through a lump in his throat. "Never."

At the same moment, another thunder sounded much closer than it should, and Techno inhaled sharply, completely without hesitation clinging both hands to Phil's, hiding his face in his shoulder. He felt a hand on his back again, slowly moving up and down.

"Really? Because I'll tell you, I'm a little scared myself."

The boy wrinkled his nose.

"You're not scared at all," he muttered, still clenching his fingers tightly. "You're only saying that to make me feel better."

Through the makeshift blanket roof, he could see another flash light up the room, and he didn't like the sight at all.

He knew it was stupid. Phil would never make fun of or reproach him, had seen him in far more embarrassing situations, and hadn't even laughed once. But still... He still felt so fucking childish, having to admit how scared he was.

"You know..." Phil's hand froze for a moment, then moved to his shoulder, pulling the boy a little tighter to his side. "When I was your age, I was terribly afraid of snakes."

Techno blinked, a bit confused. First, because he had never heard any adult admit to such a thing, and second, because of all creatures, snakes appeared to him to be among the least harmful.

"Why?" He asked, nervously pulling on the sleeves of his T-shirt.

"I have no idea. I just always found them quite... gross. Cold and slippery. And I think I read in some book that a snake could eat an entire elephant..." He shook his head. "Anyway, when I went to college my roommate asked if I would mind if he kept a snake in a terrarium. And I thought it would be stupid to admit that I was terrified of the mere sight of them... so I agreed."

Techno had a sense of where the story was going and, to tell the truth, wasn't at all sure if he liked it. Phil had never done anything to show that he liked throwing the kids out in the yard as part of a life lesson, but there was never too much caution. Not if you wanted to get out alive.

"And?" He asked uncertainly. "Have you found out that they are nice and there's nothing to be afraid of?"

Phil laughed and immediately covered his mouth to see if he had accidentally woken Wilbur.

"No way!" He snorted, still grinning broadly. "That damn creature escaped at least once a week, and on one occasion it even started shedding its skin on my bed. Absolutely disgusting. Fortunately, my roommate quit after a few weeks, and the snake went with him. But I could have avoided a lot of stress if I had just admitted right away that I don't like this creeping shit."

Techno... definitely wasn't expecting that. So he had no safe reaction prepared, and for a few seconds he just sat in silence, trying to analyze everything he had just heard.

"You were afraid that he would laugh at you?" He finally dared to ask, pulling his knees a little higher under his chin. He felt bloody small, and although it usually annoyed him a lot, he was surprisingly comfortable with it now. Safely.

"I think so." Phil shrugged. "But it made me realize, there's no sense to make two fears out of one. And people who make fun of other people's fears don't deserve to be taken into account, you know?"

Techno wanted to say that sometimes others don't care what you think about their opinion - sometimes they're just bigger and stronger and can do whatever they want with you, no matter how much you despise them. But as he sat next to Phil, all those thoughts and feelings, all the things that had formed the basis of his life for years, suddenly felt a lot more distant, and he didn't feel like reaching for it again. Not when his eyes began to close slowly and his head began to nod sleepily.

"I guess I'm a little scared..." he admitted, yawning widely. "But just a little, you know?"

Phil smiled, leaning in to kiss his forehead.

"Wait a minute," he said, untangling himself from the blankets and reaching for the flashlight to illuminate his way up the stairs.

He returned a few minutes later, proudly holding a pair of large earphones.

"Here," Techno pushed them over his ears, and the whole world went silent. "Better?"

The boy nodded, unsure what to say. And then, perhaps more tired than deliberately, he snuggled back against Phil's warm side, closing his eyes. The storm was still raging outside the window, but somehow he didn't know how to worry about it anymore.

Thirteen-year-old Techno definitely couldn't say the same. In part, probably because he was nervous and stressed before the storm, and each subsequent thunder just made him want to jump out of his own skin even more than usual. Or maybe this time the wind was actually blowing a little harder, the rain was hitting the windows louder, the thunder sounded much closer. Either way, there was no sign that it would stop or that he would be able to fall asleep. Especially since a few seconds later, just as his breathing finally normalized, he suffered another mini-heart attack, when the door to the room cracked open and a small figure stood in it in the dim light of the corridor.

Life didn't pass before his eyes - which was a good thing, it wouldn't be a happy sight - but he certainly felt a heart somewhere in his throat before his eyes finally adjusted to the sudden brightness and he could examine the figure a little closer.

"Tommy?" He asked, narrowing his eyes.

The boy didn't answer, rubbing his eyes with one hand while the other pressed the teddy cow against his chest. He yawned widely, looked up, looked around and only then seemed to wake up a bit.

"Oh." He lowered his hand and stepped back, clearly disappointed. "It's you..."

Techno didn't think he would ever feel so offended that he disappointed a night intruder. But he didn't have time to put it into words or say it out loud, because the child turned and, leaving the door open, dragged himself further down the corridor.

"Hey. Hey, where are you going?" Techno immediately jumped out of bed, to protect the child from a possible fall down the stairs.

But the child didn't even glance back at him, and when Techno followed him into the corridor, there was no trace of him. The door to Wilbur's room, on the other hand, was open, and a muffled, childish whisper came from behind it. Techno peered cautiously inside, hoping not to step on any of the creaking boards.

Tommy was just scrambling onto the bed, muttering something about not being able to sleep that Wilbur wasn't listening at all, lifting the covers urgently. His eyes were still closed, and as soon as the child was close enough, he immediately covered him tightly and pulled him close, wrapping his arms around him with the same tenderness with which Tommy held Henry.

Somewhere in the background the lightning struck again, but Techno barely noticed it. He barely noticed anything because that was his place where he sought refuge, his escape whenever he was afraid, his rescue, his brother...!

Apparently, Wilbur had a different opinion. Apparently, Wilbur just knew how to stop talking to him, and it didn't matter much to him. Apparently, he knew how to get Techno out of his life and not even look back. Apparently, he could just find someone better to replace him.

He hugged his shoulders tighter. His feet were sticking to the cold floor, but he made himself take a step back and look away. He felt as if he should be concerned with how much everything around him suddenly became indifferent to him, how empty he felt, though he could clearly hear his own tearful breath and felt the tears on his cheeks. He was tired, more than ever, in the strange way when you are not asleep at all, but merely drifting your thoughts somewhere on the verge of reality. He wanted to be away, he wanted to be small, he wanted to disappear for good and never come back.

He wanted Phil, with his firm, safe hugs and kind words.

But kind words didn't change anything and were never for him, not really.

When he got back to bed and slipped under the covers, the downpour outside the window was just starting to rage for good, and he was sure he wouldn't be able to sleep anymore.

* * *

He didn't come to breakfast in the morning. He heard a knock and then the click of a lock as someone tried to open the door, but he only pressed face tighter against the pillow, wrapping the cover tighter around him. He was tired, his head ached, and he could see absolutely no reason to bother going downstairs. Saturday mornings hadn't belonged to him for a long time

anyway. It wasn't until around noon that he was hungry enough to stop ignoring the rumbling in his stomach and reluctantly went downstairs, his bare feet shuffling down the steps. Somewhere from Wilbur's room came two raised voices and Tommy's laughter, but he chose to ignore it as much as he could. He didn't bother with any washing, what did matter, when no one was paying attention to him anyway?

Phil, seated at the table in the living room, looked up and grinned at the sight of him.

"Hey, my sleepyboy," he said cheerfully, but then frowned at his son's expression. "Rough night?" Techno nodded without a word. "Oh. I left you some waffles, would you like?" Another nod. "Okay, hold on a second."

He reached out to ruffle his hair, but Techno ducked and collapsed into a chair, immediately stretching his arms on the table and hiding his face in them, exhausted by the mere necessity to face the world. Even the extra portion of chocolate syrup on the waffles didn't cheer him up, which was very ominous in itself. He was just finishing spreading it over his plate, not having the strength to get down to the right food, when Phil glanced at him, closed his laptop, and pushed it aside, leaning over the table.

"Hey, you know..." he began, trying to smile, but the tone of his voice betrayed how stressed he was actually. Great. Another good news to complete. "I was thinking if I should set Tommy up with Puffy. I'm not entirely sure if this is a good idea if... he will have to move, so I wanted to meet her first and talk about it."

Techno didn't stop painting chocolate patterns.

"Uhm. And?"

Phil exhaled slowly.

"Maybe you'd like to... try again?"

The boy froze, his chocolate-stained finger still on the glass. He blinked, slowly raising his head.

"What?"

"Techno." A warm hand covered his fingers, pulling them away from the plate. "I really believe it would help you. I know you're doing well. And I am proud of you because I can see how hard you try." He paused, a shadow that Techno could only describe as disappointment flashed across his face. He just wasn't sure what or who exactly. "Maybe a little too much, sometimes. It shouldn't be that hard, Techno." He squeezed his fingers a little tighter as he ran his thumb over the back of his hand. "It shouldn't tire you so much. And sometimes it looks like you can barely take it all and you're so overwhelmed."

Techno had no idea which senses to believe. He could hear his own breathing, fast and shallow, but everything inside him screamed that he couldn't breathe and he was short of air. He jerked his hand out of his grip.

"I don't need any help," he practically squealed, and if he had had a little more awareness, he would probably be embarrassed by the sound of his own voice. "Nothing happens! Nothing... I didn't even do anything and- and I did everything you asked for and I even- 'His hands were trembling so much that he could hear his fingers drumming on the table. Or maybe his blood was pounding so loudly in his head, or his heart was beating so hard. "I was even nice to Tommy! You wanted me to try and I'm trying, right? What more do you want? I don't know..." He jumped up from the chair, but immediately he had to prop up the table, pressing the other hand to his temple. "What else do I have to do!?" He screamed, trying to shout over all the voices at once, their incessant, growing hum, pulsating in his temples more and more, faster and faster...

"Techno." Phil appeared beside him, trying to hold his shoulders, but immediately withdrew his hands as the boy flinched, bouncing back as if he were burned. "Hey, come on. Nothing happened." He held both hands up, keeping them in view. Techno didn't take his eyes off them, struggling with uneven breathing.

"I'm fine." It was the first he said when he finally gasped. "Everything's okay. It's already... It's okay now..."

Phil lowered his hands slowly, and though his eyes were sad and concerned, his face grew serious and his voice more firm.

"It's not okay. And I can't stand it when you're hurting yourself out of your own stubbornness."

Techno whirled around so abruptly that he almost knocked over the chair he was leaning on for balance.

"I'm so sorry to trigger your savior complex!" He growled, clenching his hands into fists. "I'll try to need your help a little more so you won't be sad! Will you then finally be satisfied with me?"

In the silence that fell in the room, each of the words echoed many more times before their meaning finally hit Techno with full force. He stepped back, staring wide-eyed at Phil's face. He could see his pain clearly, even though he tried to hide it, he saw his arms drooping limp, and for a moment, for a long, terrible moment, he was sure that he had just done the impossible - made his father finally give up. Gave up fighting for him.

He brought his hand to his mouth, not sure if he was trying more to hold back the next words or the wave of nausea.

"Fuck. I- I didn't mean to say that, I..." He felt tears welling up in his eyes and didn't even try to stop them. "I'm sorry. I just..."

Phil moved so fast Techno barely had time to notice.

He was almost expecting a hit. And it made him feel even worse when he suddenly found himself in a tight embrace instead.

"Shhh, it's okay, it's okay now." The hand moved down his back at a slow, measured pace, and he instinctively tried to match his breathing to him. He only succeeded the third time, and even then he could not call it a success, because as soon as he finally took a deep breath, he immediately cried for good.

"Why are *you* comforting *me* ?" He stammered, clutching his arms around him. "I should... I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to say that."

Phil pulled him a little closer, rocking him gently.

"Hey, come on, now... It happens."

Techno sniffed loudly.

"But somehow it always happens to me."

"It happens to everyone. To you and to Wilbur and to me, unfortunately, too..."

"Once. And we deserved it." He looked up uncertainly, looking for any signs of anger, but all he found was concern and sympathy. Somehow it made him feel even worse. "You know I don't think that at all, do you?" He asked, desperate to hear confirmation. "I just... I'm so tired and-"

Phil hummed in understanding as he started running his fingers through his hair. After a night of rolling from side to side, it was more tangled than usual, but neither of them minded.

"Is it because of the storm? You could come to me, you know?"

"I know. But I..." He paused for a moment, not really sure what he was really trying to say. "I guess I was ashamed," he finally decided, because although it wasn't entirely true, it wasn't a lie either. "Because... Because I'm too old for that. And I'm trying to be an adult, I'm really trying!" He clenched his hands a little tighter and grimaced at how much they were still trembling. "But somehow it doesn't work at all and I still... I feel like a child."

Phil rested his head against the top of his head.

"You don't like being a child?"

"No. When you're a child, people do what they want with you. And no one is listening to you. And they think they know what's good for you, and really only think about themselves. I've always wanted to be an adult. To be able to make them fuck off."

Phil didn't answer right away, continuing to stroke his back for a moment. Techno closed his eyes, listening to his steady breathing, trying to match his own with Phil's. Sometimes he wondered how he had done it before he had someone ready to help and hold him tight, close, giving him all the time he needed. He probably couldn't handle it at all and just pretended, like he did with a million other things.

When Phil finally spoke, he seemed much sadder and held his son tighter than ever before.

"I don't think you ever had a chance to be a child, Techno. Not really. And I'm very sorry about that."

"It's not your fault."

"It's not. But someone should finally apologize for that."

Techno couldn't say if hearing it actually changed anything. Did it help heal a wound, or at least make the memory of it less painful? But maybe 'I'm sorry' was never that powerful. Maybe it was just a sign that it was worth trying to fix something at all, more an opportunity than an actual solution. Maybe sometimes the most important thing was knowing that someone understood that something was wrong and made no attempt to belittle it or ignore it, even if it was in no way their fault.

He didn't have the strength to think about it. But there was one thing he was absolutely sure of.

"I like being your kid."

He felt more than saw Phil smile as he kissed the top of his head.

"I like being your dad," he said quietly. "Better?"

"Yhm..."

"What do the voices say?"

Techno slipped out of his embrace to wipe his face with his sleeve.

"They're glad you're here," he confessed, and Phil looked at him with such tenderness that he immediately looked down, blushing. He didn't protest, however, when he was drawn back into a hug, this time much shorter.

"Go to sleep. It will do you good." Phil pushed him away, but still had his hands on his shoulders, making little circles with his thumbs. "I'll make sure the boys don't disturb you."

At the mention of his brother and Tommy, Techno instinctively glanced up the stairs, listening. He had great hope that neither of them had heard anything of the whole conversation, though the silence above, unfortunately, was telling him something else entirely.

"They don't care anyway," he muttered, wrapping his arms around himself, and Phil, being perfectly predictable himself, immediately shook his head.

"You just think so. Between us," he leaned in slightly lowering his voice, "I think Wilbur just really likes it that he has someone to order around. The power goes to his head a little."

Techno raised his eyebrows.

"A little," he snorted, wincing. And then, because apparently he hadn't had enough crying in the last few days, his eyes glazed again and his chin quivered. "I'm sorry..."

"Shhh..." Before he knew it, he was already feeling hands on his cheeks. "I shouldn't have asked that now, I could see you weren't feeling well. I could have chosen a better moment. We'll talk about it another time, okay?"

Techno would rather never talk about it. He would prefer to pretend forever that the topic didn't exist, and the whole conversation was just a very long bad dream. But he knew he would not win this fight, not now and not when his opponent was as stubborn as he was.

"Will you sit with me?" He asked the rallies instead, and then quickly added, "Just a moment."

Phil smiled warmly.

"I'll sit with you as long as you need." He squeezed his shoulders tighter once more before he removed his hands. "Go, I'll come to you soon, okay?"

Techno nodded without saying a word, backing up to the stairs. He tried to be as quiet as possible, but kept his head low anyway, in case any of the other boys thought of looking out into the hallway. It was only when he closed the door behind him that he allowed himself to breathe a little deeper, and it dawned on him how exhausted he was, how sore his legs were, how stiff his arms were, and his head was heavy and throbbing with pain. When he slipped under the covers he felt as if he were almost collapsing into the mattress, legs tucked high to his chest, heart pounding hard, and a strange emptiness in his heart.

It was a few minutes before he heard footsteps in the corridor, followed by a creak of a door and his brother's voice.

"Dad, can you-"

"Wilbur, not now, okay? Can you take care of Tommy for a while?"

"But...!"

"Wilbur, please," there was a firmer note in Phil's voice, one of those he rarely used that still automatically silenced all protests. "I promise to come to you later."

Techno didn't have to see his brother's expression to know that he didn't like that answer. A few weeks ago, Wilbur would have had no trouble understanding. A few weeks ago, he would just like to know if everything is alright and that no one has been hurt. But now Techno couldn't remember the last time Wilbur really cared about anything involving him.

He slipped his hands into his hair, clenching his fingers tightly.

"Hi." Phil closed the door quietly behind himself as he crossed the room to set a mug on the nightstand and sit on the bed. "I made you some tea, drink it when it cools down a little."

Techno watched the steam mix with the air. He would also like to disappear now.

"You are mad at me?" He asked, a bit surprised at how empty and indifferent his voice seemed.

Phil reached for his hands, carefully pulling them away from his head and holding them in his hands.

"I'm not," he assured, as he had assured him many times before. Maybe even a little too much. More than he should.

"You always say that," he muttered, pulling his hands back and pressing them tightly to his chest.

"You think I'm lying?" Phil raised his eyebrows, perhaps a little surprised, which only proved that he didn't understand at all, not really. Because it wasn't that Techno didn't believe him. Sometimes Phil just acted like he thought he had no right to be hurt at all, that his feelings didn't matter at all. And that made his forgiveness completely worthless. "Your 'yes' doesn't count if you think you can't say no." Sometimes Techno wondered if his father really understood his own lessons.

"I think you should be angry. I would be angry with myself." He closed his eyes, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. "I am angry with myself."

Phil sucked in a breath and held it for a moment before exhaling slowly.

"Listen-" he began, but Techno didn't have the strength to do it right now.

"Do you like me?" He blurted out before he could change his mind, still not opening his eyes. "Just a little?"

He knew the moment of silence was probably pure surprise, but he still felt every second of it as bloody painful. He opened his eyes just to see Phil slide off the mattress and kneel on the floor, leaning in so that their faces were at a similar height.

"Of course I do," he said, in the same calm, warm voice as always. And only his eyes remained terribly sad. "Why do you think not?"

Techno had enough of crying. Not only for the next few days, but even for life. Yet before he could look back, he had to be hastily rubbing his cheeks.

"I know that you love me. And you are stuck with me. But..." He hid his face deeper into the pillow. "Do you *like me*?"

This time he didn't have to wait for an answer.

"Of course. You don't even know how much."

"And you would like me even if you didn't have to?"

"I would like you even if I saw you for the first time today. I'd pass you on the street and think, 'Yup, he's mine, I totally have to adopt him!'"

He knew Phil was trying to amuse him, so he finally dared to raise his head.

"Now you really sound like you're keeping us in the basement," he joked, trying to smile back. However, he could not get rid of bad thoughts for long. "I'm afraid Wilbur's doesn't like me anymore."

Phil brushed his hair out of his face, leaning in to kiss his forehead.

"I'm sure that's not the case," he said because, apparently, sometimes even he was running out of real arguments. "Try to sleep for a while, okay? I will sit here until you fall asleep."

Techno nodded, though he was absolutely sure he wouldn't be able to sleep. Yet somehow he must have succeeded, for when he awoke again he was alone in the room with the sun high on the horizon. Someone was running down the hall, two voices whispering remarks just outside his door, but he was unable to recognize what they were saying or to whom before his eyelids began to weigh again.

The icy desert still seemed endless.

* * *

He didn't wake up until Sunday. Apparently, his body really needed a replenishment of its energy reserves and decided to make the most of the first opportunity, because when Techno finally yawned widely and opened his eyes, it was almost noon. The curtains in the room were closed and there was a bottle of water and a plate of sandwiches with a yellow note attached to the bedside table where the tea he never had had time to drink still sat.

Call me if you need anything. Please eat something. Come downstairs when you feel better, you don't need to rush.

I love you.

He carefully peeled the piece of paper off the plate and twirled it in his hands for a long moment before he placed it safely on the table and dug out from under the covers. It was suspiciously quiet in the house, so Tommy was probably running around the garden, taking advantage of the nice weather. Techno wasn't going to check it out, he just wanted to get into the bathroom and get back to bed as soon as possible. He had no idea how he could still be so tired, although he had probably slept for several hours and his muscles had long since turned to jelly. Not that he cares about anything. Few things had mattered to him lately, not even the fact that when he glanced in the mirror above the sink, he almost scared himself. He reached

for a brush to tidy up at least his hair, but the mere thought of it would make him lose at least half of his hardly stored energy. The loose bun was more than enough. He'll be worried later if he never gets the hairband out of him again.

He gave himself one last, critical look and reached for the doorknob until he jerked as he almost ran into someone in the doorway.

"Oh." Wilbur stepped back, smiling apologetically. "Sorry. But I thought I heard you. I didn't want to wake you up."

Techno blinked, suddenly more animated than in the past week put together. Wilbur spoke to him, he spoke first, of his own free will, not because Phil gave him a scolding look across the table.

"I'm not asleep anymore," he assured quickly, not understanding why he was so stressed. Probably partly because his brother looked just as tense, swaying nervously on his heels and staring everywhere but at him.

"Do you feel better now? I heard-" He broke off and hesitated, clearly searching for the right words, then shook his head. "I heard something happened. You okay?"

Techno seriously wondered at what point everything between them got so strange and awkward. He missed his brother, the real one who could look at him, say "You cried" and accept any explanation Techno was willing to give him. Who came under his covers when he hid from the whole world, and just lay there, clutching his hand tightly. Who wouldn't have waited all day to check if everything was alright.

He shrugged.

"Better," he muttered, because he was grateful for every version of Wilbur no matter what, even the strangely alien and cold one. "Did you... want something from me?"

He sincerely hoped the answer was no, that the brother really just wanted to see if any harm had happened to him. But he couldn't say he was completely disappointed when Wilbur nodded, because the next thing he said was:

"Could I borrow a book?"

Techno blinked.

"Book?" He repeated, unsure if he had misheard. Either he had gotten delusional from it all. "You want a book?"

Wilbur seemed genuinely offended by his disbelief.

"I'm not illiterate," he snorted, but the corners of his mouth twitched slightly, and for the first time in a long time, he seemed to be truly himself. "I can read, you know?"

"Well, yeah, but you never..." He broke off and shook his head, feeling that suddenly everything was getting a little better, the weight in his chest a little lighter, the buzzing in his

head a little quieter. His brother was talking to him again and I think he was trying to be nice and make him happy. He didn't want to waste a second. "Doesn't matter. Come on, I'll find something for you!" He grabbed his hand, dragged him to his room, almost running in a sudden rush of excitement.

Wilbur didn't like books, but sometimes, especially in winter, when it was getting dark quickly and he couldn't spend that much time outside, he would let Techno read aloud. Maybe that's what he wanted this time too? Perhaps he was looking for an excuse to spend some time together, after the last oddly quiet weeks?

"Here you go." He reached for the first book on the edge, the title of which he thought, and shoved it into his brother's hands, immediately returning from running his finger along the other spines. "Give me a moment. I made a list once, but I don't remember where I put it..."

Wilbur looked up from the book he was just flipping through.

"A list of what?" He asked suspiciously, but Techno just waved him off, too happy to even give a moment more thought to his tone and expression.

"Books you'd like. Just in case you want to... Oh, and they made movies out of those, and they're horrible." He pulled two more books off the shelf. "We can watch it later to laugh and suffer."

"Um... Sure?"

"Ah." He straightened suddenly as he finally found what he was looking for the most. He grinned, almost twitching with excitement as he pressed a large volume in a brown cover against his chest. "I can show you which myths are the most interesting. You'll like it, some of them are even weirder than your ideas."

For some reason, Wilbur didn't share his enthusiasm. In fact, the more Techno stared at him, the more he noticed that something was wrong, that he had missed something very important.

"Something's wrong?" He asked, putting the mythology on the desk. "I can find something else!"

Wilbur shook his head.

"No, no, these are fine," he assured him, but he put the books back on the shelf without paying much attention to them. "But don't you have something... easier?"

It was... a bit unexpected. Not that Wilbur had ever had a hard time admitting that something was too hard for him, but he usually dove into the deep water first before actually reminding himself that he couldn't swim.

"Easier?" He made sure, already turning to look through the books again. But then Wilbur said:

"It's for Tommy." Techno froze with his hand at the height of the shelf. "Because I wanted to read something to him, so that he would sit still for a while. And he can barely concentrate

when he watches a movie, so you know..."

Slowly Techno lowered his hand.

"You want to read to Tommy," he repeated, more so to have a few extra seconds to accept the words.

Wilbur smiled, tilting his head.

"Have you had any hearing problems lately?" He asked and was probably trying to joke and loosen up the hardening atmosphere a bit, but Techno didn't care what he was trying and what he wanted. Because Wilbur didn't come here for him. He didn't come here to fix anything, to spend time with him, to cheer him up. He came because of Tommy. To show once again that the little goddamn gremlin is all he needs now, the only brother he wants.

And of all the things he could use to show it, he chose the one Techno loved the most.

"I hear very well and clearly." He wasn't sure if he actually said it or just thought it. Probably the first, because his brother pulled back, disturbed by the sound of his voice.

"Okay, you don't have to be offended right now. I just-"

"Get out."

Wilbur didn't move.

"What?"

Techno picked up the books from the floor, almost unknowingly starting to put them back in their proper places.

"Get out of my room," he repeated with an unnatural calmness. " *Now* ."

Wilbur still didn't move.

"Why-"

"Get the fuck out!" He screamed, and before he could look back he grabbed his brother by the arm, pulling him towards the door and pushing him into the hallway so hard that he lost his balance and landed on his back. His chest rose and fell rapidly, and fear filled his wide-open eyes beside the panic. "Now!"

He slammed the door without waiting for any reaction, and then he leaned back against it as he slumps heavily to the floor. He pulled his knees up, resting his forehead against them. He could still feel the anger pulsing deep under his skin, but as much as he tried, though he wanted to scream it out and finally feel better, he couldn't reach for it through a thick layer of numbness. As if someone had cut him off from his own emotions and stripped him of any control.

He heard footsteps in the hallway and wondered if Wilbur would tell Phil what had just happened, but no one knocked on the door either then, or half an hour later, when Techno finally got to his feet to turn the key in the lock.

It didn't matter to him anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Everything is falling apart...
Who's excited? :D

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

My favorite game: let's cut it open and see what's inside!
It could be fluff,
It could be comfort,
It could be bonding,
It could be proper communication!
Let's take a look!

...Oh, it's angst.

Chapter Notes

I worked at this with @Katricia! Let's gooo!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He didn't want to go to school on Monday. He would prefer to stay in bed, with the duvet pulled over his head, knees under his chin and the awareness of his own hopelessness and the pointlessness of his life keeping him company. But Phil already seemed anxious enough and ready to even force the door open just to find out what the hell was going on with his kid, so Techno didn't try to cross the line even more. He even forced breakfast into himself, though his throat was painfully tight and his stomach protested with every piece of sandwich.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Phil pressed a hand to his forehead, and he didn't seem at all reassured that he didn't seem any warmer than usual. Techno suspected that an actual illness would somehow calm him down a bit - at least he would know what's going on. For a moment he even considered lying for the good and peace of mind of both of them, but then he glanced at Tommy, licking the jam off his fingers, and Wilbur, looking anywhere but in his direction, and concluded that there was no sense in doing so.

"I'm fine," he muttered, pushing back the hand that was now smoothing his hair. Which he still hadn't even tried to brush out. He wondered if he would even be able to stick a comb into it. "I'm not dying or anything. I just didn't get any sleep."

Phil looked at him in genuine disbelief, which was actually deserved by someone who slept most of the weekend and still complains. But he didn't say anything as he drove them to school, and it wasn't until they stood in the parking lot and Wilbur jumped out of the car

waving goodbye to Tommy that he grabbed Techno's forearm, signaling for him to wait a moment.

"Are you sure you don't prefer to stay home today?" He asked, regarding him anxiously. Which was completely unnecessary, because really, Techno knew he looked like shit, he didn't need any additional confirmation. "One day without school isn't the end of the world. We could watch a movie or whatever you want."

The offer was tempting. Damn tempting. So tempting Techno found himself almost nodding before he even thought about it. He knew how Phil would act whenever any of them got even a little sick, how he practically jumped around them, fulfilling every whim, and he would lie to say that he didn't want all that attention and care at this point. But then he glanced out the window at Wilbur, talking to Schlatt in the courtyard, and he could imagine in detail what his brother would look like if he found out. If he had been jealous before, now he would most likely think Techno was deliberately toying with his feelings, things would get even worse, and overall he would pay for a moment of peace with even more remorse. Anyway, the shadows under Phil's eyes clearly said that a day without school might not end the world, but another night spent working and catching up on projects could end someone's life.

So Techno pursed his lips and shook his head, throwing a short "Bye" at the exit and not giving Tommy a glance. He was not a small child anymore, he was almost an adult, but if he knew anything about adulthood, it was that the vast majority of it consisted of inner suffering and mock composure.

So he pretended. Mainly the fact that he is actually in class, not so much physically but mentally. Sometimes he even managed to write down a few out of context sentences, sometimes he understood for a moment what was happening, but sooner or later each time his thoughts drifted away, or he stared out the window until the teacher noticed him. Normally, he would care, especially in september, when he should still have the strength to promise himself that he would learn the most, take the tests for the highest marks, and that Phil would never hear a complaint about him again. But now somehow he didn't have the strength to do it all.

Neither did he have it on tuesday or wednesday, and he could have sworn that on thursday he woke up completely exhausted. Part of it was probably because he only ate when Phil was around to keep an eye on him. Partly because the world hated him, and that was mutual. And yet, by some miracle, on the friday afternoon he not only allowed himself to be dragged out of the house, but also to the lake, even though it was raining, the air was cold, the sand was wet, and there was nowhere to sit. In his defense: Dream would stand by his window and call for him forever, 'cause the idea of using a door was as foreign to him as taking no for an answer. Of the two bad things, it was a lot easier to just agree, especially since Phil looked like he had just made his greatest dream come true.

"You'll see that it will be fun, you haven't been anywhere for a long time," he said, wrapping a scarf up to his nose. "Fresh air will be good for you."

Techno thought it would have done a lot better for him if he didn't have to share it with Tommy, whom Wilbur obviously had to drag everywhere with them. Almost literally considering he was holding him by the scarf as if he was leading a dog on a leash, but any

method of reducing the risk of the child suddenly deciding to jump under a car was welcome, so Techno made no comment. He also didn't complain that he was wearing a thin jacket, his shoes were sagging into the wet sand, and if he wanted to watch a cheap and poor pickup, he would go to the cinema for a romantic comedy. In the latter, he was handled very well by Sapnap.

"You think he even remembers we're here?" He was indignant as they watched from a distance as Dream struggles to keep George's sole attention at all costs and begins resorting to increasingly desperate methods. "Why the hell did he drag us here?"

Techno just shrugged.

"Maybe he thinks he looks better compared to us?" He suggested, watching Wilbur try to make something like a bow out of a piece of stick and string. He considered offering help for a moment, but ultimately decided there was no point in adding another rejection to the collection.

"I got a new skateboard," Dream boasted, because the last three times he tried to impress someone with his stuff went so well today that it was worth repeating the defeat for the fourth time. "I have a video recorded, do you want to see it?"

George didn't even look up from the phone.

"Maybe later," he just said, and Techno had to admit that he did admire him a little. He was as consistent in ignoring Dream's advances as he was in sitting on Dream's jacket casually thrown on the sand and eating his cookies.

"George!" Tommy, apparently bored of bothering Wilbur and chasing him all over the beach with a stick, caught up with his new victim by practically jumping onto his back. "I can do a flip! You want to see?"

George looked up, eyebrows raised.

"Okay," he agreed, and while Dream's face was undoubtedly one of the funniest things Techno had seen in recent times, he largely shared his friend's irritation.

Sapnap just smiled under his breath, took a lighter from his pocket and, as if trying to light it, then extinguishing the flame went towards Wilbur, probably planning to burn whatever he had just messed with. Dream took his place immediately, because solitude and peace were too precious for the universe to distribute left and right.

"Did you have to bring both of your brothers?" He snorted, wincing as Tommy rolled over the sand once more, picking up half the beach in his hair, and George lifted his thumb in approval. "As if one wasn't annoying enough."

Techno grimaced as he glared at him.

"Tommy's not my brother."

"Yhm." Dream rolled his eyes, making no difference to his face. "Yeah, of course. But why don't you tell that to Wilbur, because I think he has a different opinion."

Techno froze. He was used to having his friend make fun of him at every opportunity, in full reciprocity, but he definitely didn't like the unwavering confidence in his voice.

"What do you mean?" He asked, seriously, but before he got any answer, Tommy had a sudden acrobatics that, with a bit of good intentions, could actually be called a flip. He himself was so surprised by this that he sat on the ground for a moment, looking in all directions, then his face flushed with pride and he smiled so radiantly as if he thought that if the real sun had taken a break, he could replace it.

"Wilby!" He jumped up from the ground, completely ignoring his one-man audience and rushing at breakneck speed in the opposite direction. "Wilby, Wilby, have you seen it? You saw me?"

Wilbur, a second ago fiercely defending his precious weapon against the murderous effects of fire, now forgot about it completely, staring at the child with wide eyes.

"Did you just call me 'Wilby'?" He checked, and the corners of his mouth lifted slightly.

Tommy braked abruptly in front of him, digging his feet into the sand and almost losing his balance. His cheeks turned a deep red.

"No, not at all," he said, being so obvious that even if everyone had had a sudden bout of deafness before, no one would have believed him.

"Ooh, Tommyyy..." Wilbur took the baby by the cheeks, squeezing it lightly. His tone was mocking, but his eyes sparkled with excitement. "You called me 'Wilby'!"

"I didn't!"

"You did!"

"I didn't call you 'Wilby'! I called you stupid and- and you are ugly! Very ugly!"

"Ooh...!" Wilbur's voice suddenly grew much, much higher as he pressed the struggling child to his chest. "My little brother loves me! How sweet!"

Tommy continued to struggle in his embrace, screaming louder and louder to drown out his laughter, but Techno couldn't hear it anymore. He could hear nothing but his own breath tearing through his chest with every breath, except the racing heartbeat pounding in his ears, and the buzzing of thoughts clustered around a single word.

When Techno was little - he might have been four years old, maybe a little older - he couldn't quite understand that things could change without him, and even in his absence. That flowers will bloom even if he doesn't go out to the garden, the sun will rise even if he sleeps this moment, the shops will open and close. For some reason, he especially remembered one time when he tried to bring home some snow in his jacket pocket, and was very surprised to find

only a wet stain some time later. He just couldn't accept that the world might not need his approval at all in order to follow its own plan.

And maybe he still didn't understand it. Maybe he forgot at times that emotions weren't also things to put on a shelf and come back for later when he felt more ready. Perhaps he still deluded himself that they would always remain constant, that they wouldn't change without his knowledge, that they would wait patiently for their turn unchanged. Maybe he just wanted to put his hand in his pocket and take out exactly what he put in it.

Because he certainly didn't remember being so furious with his brother.

He remembered regret and a lot of unspoken grief and a sadness that he now had no strength for, and which he had stuffed deep, so deep that he wouldn't have to think about it. He remembered the jealousy as he looked at the tiny braids in Tommy's fair hair, as he saw Wilbur helping him get his hands right on the guitar, as Phil leaned in to press his forehead against the child's. He remembered the thought that he was no longer needed and the fear that one day when he went downstairs there would be only one frame left on the wall in the living room. And now he wasn't angry either, just hurt very badly, so badly that he was out of breath for a moment and the world a little less clear.

But apparently all these emotions didn't like stability, just as snow didn't like heat. Because when the first shock subsided, when he finally managed to catch his breath, he realized that somewhere along the way, without his knowledge, they had all melted. And that there is nothing left in him but pure, boundless anger, waiting only for a sign, for one small mistake...

He felt a hand on his back and almost unconsciously turned to look at it, then slowly moved his gaze a little higher. Dream smiled at him, a little mockingly, a little sympathetic.

"Am I not always right?"

And that was enough.

He didn't remember the impact itself. He remembered clenching his hands into fists, instinctively and without further thought, and a second later Dream was staggering backwards, holding his nose. He remembered his knuckles aching even before he struck the second blow, remembered the screams rising around them, remembered the crowd thickening around them, and the thought that he was trapped and had only one option left. He remembered that someone, maybe Sapnap, or maybe Wilbur, grabbed his arm and tried to pull him away, but then he backed away, elbow hit to the rib. Finally, he remembered Dream jumping on him, knocking him to the ground and pressing his weight down into the sand. Everything else was just a snapshot of color, images scattered haphazardly across his memory that he knew how to fit well. Wet sand and cold sweat on the back of his neck and pain in the back and a scream, and then suddenly he was on top, with one knee on his opponent's chest and his fist hitting Dream's forearm over and over. He was furious, he was stunned, he was absolutely terrified, and somewhere beyond all that, except his own body, operating completely automatically.

Then someone jumped on his back and the force of the momentum knocked him to the side. He swung to his feet, but another hand pinned his hands, and though he struggled in all

directions, there was nothing he could do but strangle his cheek hard against the cold ground.

He winced as someone twisted his arm a bit too much.

"Hey, don't do that, it hurts him!" He heard Wilbur's harsh voice above him, and the grip eased a little, enough to bring his arm into a slightly less uncomfortable position.

"I don't give a shit now, you know?" Sapnap snapped back, but didn't try anything else.

"Dream, are you alive?"

Dream was alive. Though he looked like he was still considering whether he wanted to keep things that way at all. His face was pale, blood running down his chin from a split lip, and he pressed one hand to his chest, panting heavily. And he was crying. Which, somehow, was the worst of it all.

Next to him, George pulled a crumpled handkerchief from his pocket, trying to wipe his face, but his hands were shaking so badly that he only smeared blood all over his chin. He tried again, but then his gaze met Techno's and he immediately withdrew his hand, jumping backwards.

"I'm color blind!" He squeaked in panic. "You can't hit me, I'm color blind!"

It was so detached from the situation that, in some weird, incomprehensible way, it made Techno feel a little more himself. As if a little absurdity was just what he needed to re-cling to reality.

He tried to wriggle out of his grip once more and met a second hard resistance.

"You can let me go," he gasped, but got no answer. "Let me go, goddamnit!"

"Sapnap, get off," Wilbur interrupted somewhere on the other side, out of his sight. "It's okay now."

The knee on his back only added pressure.

"No."

"I say, let him go."

"Not! He's dangerous!"

"I'll get dangerous soon if you don't let him go!"

Perhaps it was because Wilbur sounded like he was actually very close to fulfilling the threat, or maybe because he rarely raised his voice like that at all, but this time the scream worked and after a while Techno was able to get up, sitting heavily on the ground. The wet sand stuck to his cheek, but he didn't even try to shake it off. Nor did he care that Sapnap nudged his shoulder with his knee as he passed to sit next to Dream. He just looked down, at his still trembling hands, at the scuffed knuckles that were starting to burn like hell now, with all the adrenaline coming down.

Wilbur moved a little closer, stepping into his field of vision and crouching uncertainly in front of him.

"Hey, it's okay," he whispered, smiling slightly as he stretched his arms out in front of him as if calming a wild animal. Perhaps Techno actually was just that. A predator that can never be fully tamed, whose nature cannot be changed. He was never made for nice words and good things. His hands were the best proof of that. "Look at me, okay? Hey, Techno, come on..." Wilbur continued, still in the same calm tone. It was fucking obvious that he was trying to imitate Phil, and for some reason Techno couldn't bear to think about it.

"Piss off," he muttered, drawing his knees up and resting his forehead against them.

"Techno, ple-"

"Get the fuck off me!" He screamed, sliding his fingers into his hair and gripping it so tightly he was almost sure some of it might not survive it. His hands ached, his back ached, his head throbbed with a sharp, shooting pain, and he couldn't bear any more. "Get the fuck off me once and for all! You and Tommy and- everybody in general! Give me a break at last!"

For a moment he could only hear his own loud breathing and muffled conversation somewhere nearby, and he couldn't tell if he liked the silence or if it irritated him even more. He remembered when he was small and hid in the wardrobe from his mother, trying to hold his breath for as long as possible so as not to reveal his hiding place. He wondered if he would still be able to do that.

Wilbur put a hand on his knee, slowly and carefully.

"I want to help," he said, and it sounded really sincere, so sincere that Techno almost laughed.

His brother wanted to help. Now, after weeks of ignoring, after all the harsh words, after calling him mean, having laughed at the last thing Techno sincerely loved. After he found a new, better brother, a better friend.

He clenched his hands so tightly that he winced at the strong current in his bruised fingers.

"I don't want anything from you," he grunted, still trying to control his rising anger. "Leave me alone."

Wilbur didn't remove his hand.

"Techno-"

"I said fuck off!"

He raised his hand, taking a hard swing but made no attempt to actually deliver the punch. Whatever happened, no matter what, would never be able to hurt Wilbur. He had no idea if it was his greatest strength or his weakness. But it made little difference, for even if he merely froze with his hand up, even if he had no intention of carrying out a silent threat, it was itself a border crossing he never expected to come near.

Wilbur didn't jump back or flinch. He almost didn't move. Instead, he stared at him with cold, piercing eyes, seeming to challenge him. *Come on*, his eyes seemed to say. *Do it. You're only good at that.*

Techno lowered his arm, wrapping his arms around himself a little tighter and looking away. He didn't care what happened anymore. He didn't care that Dream was still sniffing nearby, or that Sapnap was giving him murderous glares over and over, or even that a moment later Tommy walked over to them in an uncertain, slow pace.

"Phil's coming," he said, handing Wilbur his cell phone back, and that made Techno really uncomfortable. The thought of Phil seeing him in such a state, that he would find out what he had done and be as damned disappointed as possible with him, was worse than the idea of any punishment, even the most severe.

Tommy leaned toward him, clearly torn between fear and curiosity.

"Techno feeling unwell?" He asked, his voice showing sincere, childlike concern. Techno hated him more than anyone else in the world for it. And almost more than himself.

Wilbur made no reply, taking the boy by the hand and pulling him aside, leaving his brother alone in his thoughts, anger still pulsating under his skin and a growing frustration for which he could find no outlet.

This was how Phil found him when a few minutes later he parked at the exit to the beach, next to the no-entry road, and ran all the way to the shore. He was pale, clearly concerned, and when he looked at Dream, already a little calmer but still wincing with every movement, his eyes widened in horror.

"Techno." He sat down next to his son, immediately cupping his face in his hands and scanning his entire body for any major injuries. "Everything's all right? Are you okay?"

Techno wanted to laugh very much. Because it was just so much Phil's style - seeing another child in five times worse condition and still believing that his son was definitely the victim of it all. And Techno certainly felt like it. But he wasn't stupid enough to believe he had any right to do so.

"I beat Dream," he said simply, surprising himself with how indifferent it sounded. As if he was talking about something trivial. As if his friend hadn't just cried a few yards from him.

Phil frowned, but didn't remove his hand.

"Why?"

Techno shrugged, pushing his hands away, unable to bear all the concern anymore.

"He pissed me off."

"Did he say something wrong?" Phil still wouldn't give up. "Did he do something to you?" He lowered his voice a bit, as if to let me know that whatever he said would stay between them, that he didn't have to be afraid to tell the truth.

So Techno did just that.

"He was just annoying." He shrugged once more, this time feeling that Sappnap might have accidentally strained his shoulder a little. "You know he can be."

He wondered how long it would be for his hand to stop burning. It certainly didn't help that it was dirty and had sand sticking to it. He had once infected his own wound in a similar way and definitely preferred not to repeat it. Just as he would prefer not to see Phil's face tighten, and fear is replaced by anger and obvious disappointment. He straightened up, staring down at his son as sternly as perhaps ever before.

"I also know my kids always understand this was no good reason to hit someone," he said dryly before turning his attention to Dream. "Everything's all right, mate?"

It wasn't all right and everyone knew it well before the boy shook his head.

"My arm hurts," he muttered, pressing his forearm tighter to his chest. "A lot."

Phil just nodded as he stood up and walked over to him to assess the situation more closely. Dream hissed, gritting his teeth, but allowed the sleeve of his blouse to pull up. But when Phil touched the reddened, visibly swollen spot, he cried out shortly and almost jumped back.

George looked like he was going to pass out any minute. Sappnap, for a change - as if for one request he was ready to summon an entire army from hell to avenge his friend. Phil sighed heavily as he pulled his hands back.

"I'm taking you to the hospital. Can you get up?" The boy shook his head. "All right. I'll carry you, okay?" He waited a moment for an uncertain nod before reaching for the keys from his pocket and tossing them to Wilbur. "Open the door for us. Techno." He didn't even look at him. "You're coming with us. I need to know you're definitely okay."

If there was anything worse than sitting on the beach right now - where at least one person would very willingly send him to the hospital on his own, and preferably to the cemetery right away, the other looked at him as if he was about to jump down his throat, and the third was Wilbur - it was just sitting in the car with Dream. But Phil's tone left no room for discussion, so with the utmost reluctance, but without hesitation, Techno got up from the ground and, without even brushing his pants, stumbled towards the car. He slipped into the front seat while Phil helped Dream into the back, and tried his best to melt into the seat. He was unable to determine what he was angry at and with whom at that moment. Probably mainly at himself, that he had led to the whole situation, that he allowed himself to be provoked and carried away so easily by emotions that now didn't even suffice for him to apologize. Because maybe he didn't regret it at all. Maybe all of this hadn't hit his conscience yet, so he was suspended between knowing he should feel something and utter indifference, and he felt really nasty about it.

And then Tommy suddenly broke from Wilbur's embrace, ran over to Phil and hugged him tightly around the waist, and Techno immediately decided that he was able to divide his anger with someone else.

"I'm going with you!" The boy squealed, looking up to look up with his large, despairing eyes, demanding immediate attention.

Phil just shook his head.

"Tommy, no." He tried to disentangle himself from the embrace, but as soon as he let go of the boy's hands, he immediately clung to his shirt again. "You'll go home with Wilbur and you'll be waiting for us."

"But I want to go with you!"

"Tommy." Phil frowned, and the boy flinched at the new sharp note in his voice. He withdrew his hands, taking a step back, clearly frightened by such a sudden change, but Phil's face had already softened, and he sighed heavily as he dropped to one knee. "Listen. I know you don't like it when I leave you and I know that's not how we usually do it. But the situation is serious and you'll just have to trust me this time. I need you to be as brave as you can now. Can you do this for me?"

The boy's expression made it clear that the honest answer was no. But perhaps because of stress, maybe because of the need to prove something to himself and to others, or maybe simply because time may not always heal wounds, but sometimes it helped to forget about them for a moment - he slowly nodded and backed away, grabbing Wilbur's hand. Techno didn't even look at his brother. He was too afraid that he would see a complete stranger in his place.

The road to the hospital dragged on mercilessly, even as Phil kept pressing the gas and urging each red light, his fingers tapping nervously on the steering wheel. Every now and then he turned to ask if Dream was feeling worse, but he still didn't pay much attention to his son. Techno couldn't honestly say that he was particularly unhappy about it. In fact, he was grateful Phil wasn't trying to scold him right now, and spared him at least some embarrassment.

They spent way too much time in the admission room, waiting for Dream's parents to arrive and fill out all the necessary paperwork. The doctor then managed to assure Phil that, apart from a few abrasions, Techno was completely okay and in full health, so when two very nervous adults rushed to the hospital, the boy discreetly withdrew and curled up in the farthest corner possible, trying to pretend that they raised voices were not reaching him.

He didn't look up until a good quarter of an hour later, when Phil sank heavily into the chair next to him. And even then, he didn't dare to look him straight in the eye, his gaze wandering over the white walls.

"Am I in trouble?" He asked finally, when the silence began to get too heavy even considering the whole situation. He wasn't sure if it was a good move or not, if he should have been interested first if his friend was okay, but he was tired and somehow still angry, so he preferred to get straight to the point.

Phil took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment before finally turning to face him. When Techno was little, he believed for a long time that the situation in his house was

completely normal. After all, most of his friends repeatedly said that 'their parents will kill them for something', or lamented their bad judgment, because 'they will have trouble at home.' It was only much later that he realized that the fear of getting scolded for trying to start the mower himself and probably breaking it for good, is slightly different than the fear that if he's caught stealing food, he won't be able to get up out of bed for the next two days. Phil wasn't scary, not in the way Techno was used to and learned to ignore. But sometimes his sadness and disappointment were five times worse than even the strongest blow.

As now, with his expression on its own, how much effort it costs him to remain relatively calm.

"Formally?" He shrugged. "You'll rather get away with it. His parents didn't take it very well, but Dream told them that he attacked you first. He's really saving your skin right now, so you better remember to thank him afterward."

Techno blinked in complete surprise. Dream was his friend, of course, but he hadn't expected him to lie and try to cover him up, and certainly not under such circumstances. Why would he ever do something like this after he hadn't even heard one stupid 'I'm sorry'?

"Oh." It was all he could get out of himself. He swallowed hard as he shifted nervously in the chair. "And... and less 'formal'?"

Phil straightened, staring down at him.

"Less formal," he began, his voice still low but much less composed, "I'm absolutely furious and very disappointed in you. What were you even thinking? You broke his arm. Do you get it?" Techno nodded, completely automatically and without thinking, and somehow seemed to make the situation even worse. "And it could have ended even worse! How could you act this way? I always thought you of all people would understand-" He paused, leaning forward for a moment, his face in his hands, and when he straightened again he suddenly seemed more tired and much older. "We'll talk at home," he decided. "Come on, Wilbur's probably out of his mind."

They were silent all the way back. Neither of them even turned on the radio. Techno pressed his forehead to the glass, watching the houses pass by and trying not to think for a moment about the huge mess he had made. It started to get dark, and there were nightlights burning here and there, and the farther they were from the city center, the fewer people he saw on the street. Phil focused on the road, driving a lot slower and safer this time, but when they finally reached the driveway, he didn't even reach for the doorknob.

"Go inside," he ordered when Techno looked at him in surprise, with one foot out. "I need to... cool off a little."

Oh. He felt his stomach tighten. This wasn't the first time Phil needed a moment to keep his composure. He usually locked himself in his room or went out to the garden, and usually he did come back much calmer and more inclined to remember that he couldn't kill his children and bury them somewhere next to the potatoes. But it was rare, and it was always a signal that this time they were really going overboard and in serious trouble.

Logically, he knew there was no danger. Logically, he was absolutely safe, no matter what he did and how badly things would have gone. Logically, Phil still loved him and cared for him even when he didn't deserve it at all.

But in times of stress, and this was definitely one of them, logic wasn't Techno's strongest point. So when he felt a touch on his hand, bringing him back to reality, he flinched, yanking his arm away and almost hitting his head against the ceiling.

Phil immediately stepped back, giving him more space.

"Techno." There was a sense of sadness in his voice, but also unwavering confidence. "I'm very angry with you, but I would never hurt you. You know that, right?"

Techno knew. But maybe he still needed a reminder sometimes. Especially when he sincerely believed that he deserved nothing better.

Wilbur and Tommy were sitting in the living room, and they both immediately turned their heads as soon as they heard footsteps in the living room. Techno kicked off his shoes, pretending not to feel their eyes on him, but he couldn't help but glance over his shoulder, already with one foot on the stairs. He regretted it immediately, because even though he hadn't said a word, the very way Tommy had crouched down, clearly frightened, and Wilbur immediately put his arm around him was more than enough to make him angry again.

He couldn't remember the last time he slammed the door to his room, really slammed it, with all the anger and frustration that still inflamed him, even though he pressed the pillow to his face and screamed until his throat ached. He wanted to cry, and at the same time he despised himself for every act of weakness, because he didn't care, he didn't care at all, and he didn't care about Tommy and he didn't care about Wilbur and all that brotherhood and the fact that he felt so damn rejected and deprived of something he never even wanted.

Phil didn't come back for another half hour. When he finally knocked on the door, Techno was already lying on the bed, wrapped in the blanket tightly, as if he planned to never untangle himself again. Because he didn't actually plan to. Just as he had no intention of making it any easier for anyone, not when the whole world had apparently colluded to turn all its forces against him.

He didn't move when the mattress sagged under the extra weight, or even when someone carefully slid the blanket off his head and onto his shoulders. He still stared stubbornly ahead, not even knowing what exactly he was looking at or what he was actually trying to achieve.

Phil was silent for a long moment, perhaps wanting to give him a chance to defend himself, perhaps waiting for inspiration, and when no miracle happened after all, he sighed very, very hard.

"What should I do with you?"

He was asking himself more than anyone else, but Techno shrugged anyway.

"I don't know. I don't care."

His hand continued to hurt, and it probably wasn't going to stop for a while. He should at least wash his knuckles with water, but the thought seemed as abstract and distant as possible at that moment.

And he wanted to cry again.

Phil was clearly not expecting this answer as he withdrew his hand from his shoulder.

"But you should." He said dryly and oh, Techno hated that tone, this almost palpable disappointment. "Your friend ended up in the hospital because of you. You're not a little kid anymore, Techno. You can't get carried away, not like that. You have to understand that everything you do has consequences. Especially the bad decisions." He paused for a moment, clearly waiting for some reaction, and when he didn't get any, he exhaled slowly. "Do you understand what you did?"

Techno shrugged.

"I fucked up, I know," he grunted, still stubbornly staring at the void. He blinked back tears. "I'm not stupid."

That was also certainly not the correct answer. Though, to tell the truth, he suspected that it just didn't exist.

"You're definitely acting very stupid now. If Dream's parents wanted to press charges, you could be in serious trouble." Phil must have made it a point of honor to reason with him, here and now. "I could be in trouble because I'm responsible for you, and I should make sure that never happened."

Techno wanted to scream. He wanted to grab the nearest thing and throw it against the wall so hard that there was a trace of it. But he didn't have the energy to do even that.

"It's not my fault you suck at your job," he said dryly, and oh, how bad it sounded even to his own ears. He didn't even have to look at Phil to know he had hit a vulnerable spot, the long silence and the tightening atmosphere were all it needed to do.

"Techno." When Phil spoke again, he sounded like he didn't quite believe they were having this conversation at all. "You do realize that at worst they could take Tommy from me?"

Techno has never been so ashamed of the lack of any emotions in his life.

"They're supposed to take him anyway."

"But not in this way, and not in such circumstances." Phil raised his voice, then paused to calm himself down a bit. He was clearly finding it more and more difficult. "Listen. I know the situation is unique. And I understand that it was hard for you from the beginning. But you can always talk to me, you remember that, right? I'm..." He sighed heavily and suddenly stroked his hair, as carefully as if he wasn't sure if it would just make it worse. "I'm angry now, it's true, but that doesn't mean I care any less about you. What's going on, Techno? You haven't been yourself lately."

He was still combing his hair, and Techno suddenly realized that it was irritating him more and more with each passing second. Because Phil pretended to understand, just as Wilbur pretended to still care. Because he was saying all the right, damn nice things, but if he really heard everything his son had felt and thought over the past few weeks, he would have taken every word back immediately.

"I'm the same as always," he muttered, which was just a lot of sad truth. Sometimes he felt as if he was still the same scared child, as if the years when he finally had a family and a real home had failed to change him for the better in any way.

Phil didn't remove his hand. If possible, his touch became even more gentle, and his voice became noticeably softer.

"I didn't fall for it when I knew you for a month, do you really think it'll work now? You avoid us. You lock yourself in the room, you're constantly stressed, at times I am afraid to speak to you, so that you won't-" He broke off in half sentences, but they both knew very well how he wanted to end them. "I'm worried about you. And I really have no idea how I can help you now. I don't know what to do anymore."

Techno really wanted to believe him. But Wilbur also promised that Tommy would never be more important to him, that Techno was his only brother, that everything would stay exactly as it was, as it should be.

Logically, Techno knew Phil loved him. But he couldn't be sure that he wasn't going to love Tommy much more soon. It was easier to get used to the thought now than to be disappointed later.

"Did you ever know?" He snorted, getting up on his elbow so he could meet Phil's eyes for the first time. Something choked his chest and he felt a lump build up in his throat, but he forced himself to hold his head high.

Phil closed his eyes for a moment.

"I know you're angry. You have the right to it. But if you don't explain why to me, I won't be able to fix it. If something happens, you can-"

"I'm fine!" He sat up so violently that he felt dizzy. "I was just pissed! I was angry, okay?"

Phil's face tightened instantly.

"Me too." He admitted, frowning. "I'm still angry. But I don't know if you've ever noticed that I didn't hurt anyone."

Techno wanted to laugh. And scream. And cry, preferably at the same time.

"Well, so you must be better than me," he snorted, spreading his arms wide. "What a surprise! I'm crazy, wow, discovery of the year!"

He could easily see that Phil had no idea how to react or what to focus on in the first place: the words themselves or the anger with which they were uttered.

"You're not crazy, Techno," he said finally, because of course he chose this particular thing out of all possible things. Techno hated him for it, hated his damn concern, hated that he loved him so much and that even now some part of him just wants to cuddle up in Phil's arms and cry. "It's okay if you just can't make it sometimes."

He clenched his hands into fists.

"Wow, that's amazing. This is what they teach you in all that therapy? I'm quite jealous now!"

For a second he really regretted those words, because Phil looked at him as if it was the first time he had faced him and had no idea who he was really talking to. Then he got out of bed and was suddenly very, very distant, more than ever before.

"We're not going to talk like that," he said in a sharp, cold tone. "Come to me when you calm down. You don't move a step from this house, you don't watch TV and I'm taking your phone." He held out his hand and Techno wordlessly reached into his pocket to hand him back his phone. "Techno. I hope you know you're gonna have to apologize to Dream?"

He nodded, staring down at his hands, clutching the blanket. There were still traces of blood on his knuckles.

And then he was finally left alone, just as he had wanted from the very beginning.

So why did he suddenly feel so bad about it?

Chapter End Notes

Me writing about feelings: Hundred pages about melted snow.

Me writing dynamic fight scene: ...So there was a big battle and Voldemort died.

This scene was so hard for me to write, I swear to gods, I suck at this XD

Also, my sister and I joke that the only reason Phil didn't kill Techno in this chapter is because he and Wilbur both have ✨trauma armor✨

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Here. That's all comfort you can get for now. Take it or leave it.

Chapter Notes

Guess who got help from @Katricia? I did! :D

Techno didn't leave his room that day. Or the next one. In fact, he didn't plan on ever going out again. He could bury himself in the sheets, patiently wait for a slow, pitiful death, to free everyone from the burden of his existence once and for all. Unfortunately, as damned enticing as it was, it was also utterly unfeasible, not when Phil regularly checked him for vital signs and forced him out of the way of his desired end.

"You didn't eat anything," he said, standing in the doorway, holding the plate of Saturday's dinner in his hand, which he had left on the doorstep a good two hours earlier. Techno has never bothered to get it. He hadn't even gotten out of bed.

"I'm not hungry," he muttered, although his stomach twisted and he was sure that knowing his luck, a loud grunt would betray him.

Phil grimaced as he looked down at his son, at the already cold dish, and back at the boy.

"I'd prefer you eat something."

I'd prefer to die, Techno thought as he pulled the blanket tighter over his head. When he found a plate of sandwiches and a cup of tea still hot under the door shortly after, on his way out to the bathroom, he began to seriously wonder if Phil really didn't understand that he was only making things worse by giving him a guilty conscience.

Wilbur made no attempt to see him. There was no knock on the door, no one pulled his blanket off him or lay down next to him to cheer him up, and the sound of Wilbur's guitar came from a completely different part of the house. Over and over the same chords, sometimes perfectly clean, sometimes a little false and clunky, as Tommy stubbornly tried to repeat the right moves. Techno listened to them, lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, in a tangle of sheets that he had no strength to move from, fully aware that somewhere nearby, some kind of arrangement was being completed. Tommy was becoming the brother Wilbur deserved and always wanted to have. Which Techno apparently never knew how to be.

He wanted so badly to be able to say that it was unfair, that it should never have happened, that he had been cheated in some way. But deep down he just understood. Because Tommy was... happy. Just like that. Despite everything that happened to him in his life, he still had enough energy and serenity to get over it, to trust someone and give another chance. To make noise, invent silly games, and be a pesky little flea without any inhibitions or fear. Techno wasn't sure at what point he stopped being like that himself.

(He knew exactly when and why.)

And maybe he could be happy about it. Perhaps it would be easier for him to know that some people's lives are better, that sometimes, by some miracle, the system actually works well and protects its charges. Maybe he could look at his hands, see Wilbur unable to eat, wake up at night from nightmares so realistic that he needed time to even believe he was safe - and be grateful that Tommy didn't have to face something similar.

But, no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't. Because Tommy was absolutely everything Techno could never be. He was cheerful, trusting, and clung to people instead of running away from them. His past was painful enough to inspire sympathy, but still not brutal enough to leave a lasting mark on him. He was the child people expected to become foster families for - perfect to show off to neighbors and win the title of saviors at little cost.

Techno always told himself that he didn't want to be like that. He doesn't want to be a trophy on someone's shelf, don't want to be docile, polite and grateful that someone has shown him a minimum of respect. He doesn't want to give anyone that satisfaction. But at some point, in some house, in some family, he was suddenly struck by the thought that it wasn't that he didn't want to, but he simply couldn't. He can't be nice. He can't be polite. He cannot stop being suspicious, he cannot trust. He can't be normal. And he still couldn't. For over two years, for all the good things, all the happy memories, despite the days when he really forgot that he was in any way different from most of his peers - he was still the same.

So maybe he was going to stay that way forever.

* * *

The sun was just starting to set when the door squeaked open and Tommy stuck his head in, suspiciously enthusiastic and eager for someone who had witnessed a fight only the day before. He looked around the room, and when their eyes met, he grinned broadly and made his way through the room in three steps.

"Techno! You're not asleep!" he rejoiced, jumping on the bed. Techno wanted to kick him to the floor, but after a second's thought, he decided it wasn't worth it. The kid was way too stubborn, he would be back soon.

As if to confirm, Tommy began digging through the tangle of duvets and blankets, slipping under one of them and climbing on all fours to the opposite corner, finally emerging triumphantly next to Techno's.

"Watch something with me!"

"Get lost." Techno immediately pulled away, trying to push him away, but the boy thought avoiding a knee punch was a lot of fun, because he just laughed as he stubbornly followed him.

"Come on! Don't be like that... Phil said if it's with me, you can. Exceptionally." He added as if Techno really needed a reminder at this point that everyone was still pissed at him.

Everyone except the one person who should leave him alone once and for all, apparently.

"Because I asked very nicely."

He was obviously proud of his negotiating skills, as if convincing Phil about anything wasn't just a matter of making a suitably sad face.

Techno knew it was stupid to take it all personally. That it makes no sense to get angry because the child didn't understand the tense situation at home and was trying to cheer him up in his own way. But there was something bloody ironic about the fact that of all people it was Tommy who still wanted his company, that he was the one looking at him without even a hint of fear or doubt.

Techno really wanted to hate him. He really wanted to be angry with him and blame him for everything, and the more he saw that there was really no reason for it, the more he tried to find it.

"I don't care what you asked for," he growled, pushing the boy away so hard that he landed on his back. "What, are you bored of Wilbur? You're not glued to him anymore?"

Tommy, still propping himself up on his elbows, tilted his head as he stared at him in amazement. He clearly didn't understand any of the accusations, which only irritated Techno even more.

"Wilbur is cool," the boy said, quite freely and without a moment's thought. And then he grinned broadly, his eyes flashing. "But I like you too. And you're cool too. Watch a movie with me!" He sprang to his feet, bouncing on the mattress. "Watch, watch, watch...!"

Once, maybe a year ago, maybe a little more, Techno had an argument with Wilbur about something. It was one of the few times when they got really carried away and screamed at each other for real, until Phil finally separated them and sent them back to the rooms to cool down a bit. He was only half-successful, because although the house did get quiet, Techno wasn't any closer to reaching out for apology.

Phil just looked at him, offended at the world and desperate to be an only child, and only raised his eyebrows.

"Are you mad at Wilbur, or is it simply because you're wrong?"

Techno didn't reply, which was very telling in itself.

And maybe he wasn't mad at Tommy now either, not really. Maybe he just couldn't bear the thought of being mean to him, treating him badly and considering him his greatest enemy even before he even knew him, when the boy was still staring at him with those big, trusting eyes and just wanted a little attention.

Maybe he just couldn't come to terms with the fact that everything he had experienced in life could never justify him being a bad person.

But it all didn't matter because Tommy was right there and getting angry with him was so easy and natural...

"Shut up!" He screamed, surprising even himself. The child, perhaps more scared by the noise than by the words themselves, shuddered, lost his balance and slapped lightly on the mattress. "Shut up, shut up, or I-!"

Or I'll lock you up somewhere, he wanted to say, but at the last moment the words got stuck in his throat. Even without them, Tommy looked at him with his big, wide-eyed eyes, and for a moment Techno was sure he was about to start crying or screaming or running to complain to Phil.

He didn't do any of these things.

"Have you watched Moana?"

Techno felt as if someone had suddenly slapped him in the face, threw a blanket over his head, and then said calmly that it was getting dark and it was time to go to sleep. He blinked to wake up, but no matter how many times he tried, the sight was still exactly the same: an absurdly happy child staring at him with obvious expectation.

"I haven't watched any fucking Moana," he growled, throwing off the blankets and kicking his legs to disentangle himself from the covers. Perhaps because after two days in a thick cocoon, his clothes were sweaty and far from fresh, but the room suddenly felt much colder than before.

Tommy immediately jumped off the bed, following him toward the door with a bouncy step.

"We can watch it together, if you want?" He suggested, and Techno froze with his hand stretched out towards the doorknob. He looked around slowly, eyebrows raised high.

"Why would I want to watch some stupid movie with you?" He asked, surprisingly calm considering how fast his heart was beating. "Why would I want to do anything with you?"

He must have been making a face though, because Tommy had his shoulders curled up, suddenly much less confident.

"Because it's funny...?" He suggested shyly, sending a quick glance towards the door, as if he suddenly preferred to be on the other, safe side.

Techno couldn't care less.

"You know what's not funny at all?" He took a step forward, and the child immediately did the same in the opposite direction. "Having you in my house. Since you showed up, you've been doing nothing but getting on my nerves, and I can't wait for Sam to finally get you out of here. You're annoying and useless and too stupid to see that nobody wants to have anything to do with you."

Tommy inhaled sharply, and though he immediately lifted his chin high, he was betrayed by his tremors and glistening, wet eyes.

"Not true!" He indignant, high, squeaky voice and immediately took another step back. "Phil-Phil likes me! And Wilbur! And Tubbo!"

Techno almost laughed.

"Phil only agreed to take you because they couldn't find another place for you. Nobody wanted you here," he continued, watching the remnants of color drain from the child's face. "Phil took pity on you because you are weak and pathetic and he just feels sorry for you. Do you really think he wants to deal with you? Do you think he wants to solve your silly problems and listen to your whines? You think he deserved nothing better than being stuck with you? Even your mother didn't want you, why would anyone else?"

He wondered if this was how his previous guardians felt. Did they feel the satisfaction of looking at a scared little child who never got the chance to do anything really bad?

He hated the idea that, in Tommy's eyes, he had probably become one of them. He hated knowing that he had done it to him consciously, knowing full well what the effect would be. And he hated that each of the words he said existed in his head long before the boy appeared, and none of them were ever meant for Tommy.

Tommy, so far frozen with fear, now, in an extended silence, sniffed loudly, a soft, muffled sob escaping his throat.

"I don't want to play with you anymore!" He dodged Techno, rushing towards the door. His hand was trembling so much that it wasn't until the second time that he was able to turn the door handle. "You're- You're like my mom!" He called again, turning to look at him one last time. His face was red and his cheeks were wet, and his eyes mingled with fear and anger. "I want you to go away and never come back, like she did!"

He slammed the door and his footsteps echoed in the hallway, then died away as he locked himself in his own room. Techno stood still for a long time before slowly, without much awareness of his own body, returned to bed, feeling emptier and more emotionless than ever before.

* * *

He didn't dare to go downstairs until the following afternoon, when he could no longer stand a second longer alone with his thoughts, and his muscles slowly began to turn to jelly. He wanted to scream at the mere thought of Monday and school, but never in his life would he ever dare to ask Phil to let him stay at home. Admittedly, no one had come to murder him so far, which probably meant that Tommy had kept his outburst to himself, but he was not sure and wasn't going to accidentally get on a mine by himself.

Wilbur was just setting the table, telling something loud enough for the rest of them to hear from the kitchen. He frowned in a mixture of shock and amazement at the sight of his brother, but although he opened his mouth to speak, he closed it without a word and looked away. Techno didn't blame him. He disgusted himself more than anything else, and he was very careful to ensure that everyone around him would feel the same, still avoiding baths and practically never changing clothes. On closer inspection, there was still a dark trail of blood on the sleeve of his sweatshirt, and his socks probably had a ton of beach sand in them. He absolutely didn't care.

Phil leaned out of the kitchen a moment later, most likely disturbed by the sudden silence. Techno was almost waiting for some harsh comment that he had finally decided to emerge from the cave, or that he could at least try to look normal when normal behavior was clearly out of the question. But Phil just smiled as if he had completely ignored his condition.

"Hey, kiddo." He stepped closer, setting a dish of potatoes on the table, and then hugged him tightly, because he obviously had serious problems with his eyesight, smell, and maybe a little with his own dignity. "Hungry?"

Techno shrugged, slipping out of his embrace and immediately regretting it, when his gaze fell on Tommy, leaning uncertainly around the doorframe. He turned his head immediately, but even then he could feel the intense gaze of a pair of fearful eyes on him all the time. It was selfish and quite brazen about his situation, he knew, but he sincerely hoped the boy wouldn't immediately mention what had happened between them. If he wanted to do this, he might have waited until Techno was far enough away so he wouldn't have to hear everything he said that night all over again. If the universe had planned to do him a favor once, now was the right time.

And maybe the wish did work, and maybe Tommy was still too scared to say anything, but even though he pushed his chair back as far as possible and shot Techno stealthy glances over and over, he said nothing. Almost literally. Wilbur managed to get a few single words out of him, but besides that, the child was practically only focusing on sluggishly moving food around the plate with a fork (when did he start using cutlery? Techno must have missed it somehow...). It didn't help at all in the already exceptionally heavy atmosphere. Phil was going out of his way trying to keep the conversation going, but he was lucky to get even a single grunt in response, so after a while even he gave up. Wilbur was interested only in Tommy, who was sluggish and downright depressed, and repeatedly nudged him under the table or tossed bits of his chicken on his plate. Techno tried to blend in with the chair and cease to exist.

And then, quite suddenly, Tommy sniffed. Just one time and quietly, but it was enough for all heads to immediately turn to him. Techno felt very hot, and all his instincts were telling him to run away. He didn't move from his seat.

"Tommy?" Phil reached across the table to brush the boy's hair from his forehead, then gently cupped him by the chin, urging him to raise his head. "Hey, what's that sad face about? Something happened?"

The boy sniffed again and raised his hand, tightening his fingers tightly on the larger hand.

"My mom's really not coming back for me... is she?"

Techno was sure his sigh of relief sounded far too loud in the silence in the lounge. Or maybe he was just told that by his already severely strained conscience.

Wilbur shifted restlessly, clearly torn between the need to run to the boy's help and knowing that he couldn't protect him from this one threat, not in any easy, obvious way. Phil kept his face blank, but his free hand tightened on the table top and he closed his eyes for a moment to pull himself together and prepare for a long, unpleasant conversation.

"No. I'm afraid not", he said finally, softly and gently and with almost palpable sympathy. He got up from his chair, trying to withdraw his hand so as not to accidentally knock any of the glasses down, but Tommy immediately clung to his forearm, sniffing even louder than before.

"Sorry," he whimpered, and it was hard to judge for what and for whom. Phil hummed reassuringly, circling the table to crouch down in front of him, stroking his hair again. "It's-it's stupid because I knew she never liked me. But... But she's my mom." His chin trembled, and the first tears ran down his cheeks. "If she doesn't want me, who would?"

Techno has done things he wasn't proud of. Even more often he did and said things he was ashamed of a few seconds later. Much more than he should be, to tell the truth. Usually, however, even in the worst cases, he could honestly say that he had no intention of hurting anyone. He didn't want to be mean, he didn't want to offend his friends, he didn't want to make Wilbur cry, he didn't want to turn off the people who really cared about him. He was just angry and scared and sometimes he kept forgetting that he was safe and there was nothing to protect against.

This time, he had no excuse. No explanation other than the fact that he just wanted to hurt Tommy, he wanted to be cruel to him, he wanted to scare him and make him cry. And, apparently, he finally succeeded. He had finally achieved his goal, and it felt as horrible as he had first foreseen.

And he hated the idea that if he could go back in time, he probably wouldn't change anything.

Phil continued to run his hand through blonde hair at a slow, steady pace.

"Hey, Tommy? Can you look at me?" He asked, patiently waiting for the boy to raise his head uncertainly. "Great. Thank you. Listen to me carefully, will you? Whatever's happening right

here," he tapped kid's forehead gently with his finger, "you can't think it's your fault."

Tommy didn't look like he was going to listen at all. In fact, he looked as though he had found his guilt long ago and was in the middle of a very dramatic lynch.

"But-"

"No, there's no but." Phil's voice tightened, but his gestures remained cautious and gentle. Techno has always admired him for being able to stay calm no matter what. No matter how dramatically his children chose to express their emotions, Phil let them scream and cry and never questioned their right to just hate the world at any given moment. But he never let them hate themselves. "You're a child, Tommy. You're not responsible for your mom's decisions. She's an adult and had no right to use you as an excuse and justification for her own mistakes." He took the boy's face in his hands, looking deep into his eyes. "You haven't done anything wrong and nothing that happened to you is your fault. Understand?"

Tommy understood. Techno could clearly see the moment when it dawned on him that someone really saw him as a victim, that someone was taking his pain seriously and was not going to belittle it or ridicule it. That someone genuinely sympathizes with him and would do anything to undo every bad word, every nasty gesture and every second of doubt and belief that maybe he is actually the worst child in the world and deserves to be treated like that.

Techno knew each of these thoughts and each of the emotions they brought with them. Relief and disbelief and the first flash of anger at all the injustice of the world and the fact that no one has appeared before to protect him from it. So while Phil did exactly what he should, though he said every right thing and did it with such unwavering certainty that it was impossible not to believe him, Techno wasn't at all surprised that Tommy just looked at him with wide, teary eyes, and started crying harder.

"Hey, hey, it's okay." Phil immediately stroked his back. "You can cry, it's okay. I'll pick you up, okay?" He waited a moment for the boy to nod between one shallow breath and the other before straightening up, holding him close, letting his legs wrap around his waist and his arms around his neck. He hummed reassuringly, rocking him gently, running his free hand through his fair hair. "I'll take you upstairs, okay?"

Tommy lifted his head from his shoulder.

"But... But stay," he asked tearfully, with such despair as if he really expected anyone to leave him alone at this moment. "Please, I can't- Stay."

Phil leaned over to kiss his forehead before pressing him back against his chest.

"I'll stay. Of course I will."

Techno kept his eyes on him as he carried the boy up the stairs, then stared at the void for a long time, when they both vanished from his sight. He heard footsteps upstairs, the soft creak of a door, and the murmur of distant conversation, but besides that, the living room was completely silent, and he didn't like the loud beating of his heart in it. Wilbur sat across from him, eyes fixed on his own hands, and there was no sign of him ever noticing how heavy the

atmosphere around them was, how overwhelming the situation was becoming, and how painfully inadequate it was to be in it at all. Techno didn't remember ever feeling this bad around his brother. Even at the very beginning, when he distrusted him more than any other, strange child, there was always something reassuring about his presence. And while this was largely due to the fact that Wilbur was walking evidence that Phil probably didn't choose to bully his charges as a goal in life, there was also something convincing about his smile and the stubbornness with which he tried to befriend everyone.

Techno hated the idea that at some point he lost the right to do so. At some point his brother stopped feeling comfortable with his company, stopped wanting to spend time with him, stopped trying to cheer him up. He stopped smiling.

And, apparently, he wasn't going to try to fix it at all, because before Techno could pull himself together to say anything, Wilbur suddenly looked up, glanced sideways, and frowned.

"He left Henry," he said, perhaps more to himself, already reaching for the stuffed animal sitting in a lonely chair. He just held it for a moment, as if he wasn't sure what to do, before shuffling his chair loudly, got up from the table and ran up the stairs.

Being a child, Techno was used to eating in a hurry. He was even more used to emptying his plate while listening to screams, sometimes directed at him, sometimes at his foster siblings. He had never expected that eating alone, in an almost silent home, could be more unpleasant and hard to bear.

* * *

Phil didn't leave Tommy's room until two hours later and apparently took Wilbur with him, because Techno could hear his brother's voice coming from below as he helped pick up the plates. For a moment he wondered if any of them had even noticed his absence, but quickly decided that it didn't really matter. He didn't deserve to be worried about, not when Tommy cried because of him, when he blamed himself for something beyond his control, because Techno himself made him think this way, called him stupid and useless and...

And all that Techno himself was.

Tommy might have his faults, he might be irritating, he might be loud, he might get everyone's attention and steal someone else's brothers, but he certainly didn't deserve to be treated that way. Especially by someone who was a thousand times worse in almost every way, even if Tommy wasn't fully aware of it himself. So although it might not have been the best idea, and there might have been more remorse than actually wanting to help, and maybe he was doing it almost exclusively for himself and it was nightmarish selfishness, Techno quietly left the room and ran down the hall, holding Steve under his arm. He knocked on the

door, nervously glancing over his shoulder, and hesitated a second too long before he pressed the handle at the soft "You can come in."

Tommy was certainly expecting someone else, because as he lifted his head off the pillow and looked towards the entrance, his eyes widened and his arms tightened around the teddy cow. For a moment he looked like he wanted to run or scream, but in the end he only pressed his lips together and lowered his head, crouching even more, his forehead resting on Henry. Techno felt his stomach twist and he needed a whole lot of self-denial not to turn around and disappear from the boy's sight before he did even more damage. But, since he was, indeed, a bloody selfishness, he forced himself to slowly walk over to the bed and sit down at the very edge of the mattress.

He hadn't been in this room for a long time, and he had missed the moment Tommy had managed to make him so... his own. From the drawings taped to the closet door, to the large, crookedly stitched flag of their imaginary country (he was absolutely sure they had sacrificed at least two T-shirts to create it), to the scattered crayons, to the cardboard box in the corner of the desk, where Henry probably waited patiently, until its owner has finished his homework. The walls were a nice light blue shade, the windows were decorated with stickers that cut off exactly at the level where the child reached from the window sill, and in the very corner there was an unfinished building made of Lego bricks. There was nothing left of the cool, empty room they had admitted the boy to just a few weeks ago, and Techno couldn't tell for himself whether he was more happy or worried about it. Because even he began to forget sometimes that it was never meant to be 'forever' and sooner or later Sam would call with good news.

But for now, Tommy was right there, scared and tense, and Techno was ready to do a lot to change it.

"Hey," he began, and when the boy didn't even flinch, he cleared his throat loudly. And then a second time, just to be sure. "Here. For you." He pulled Steve over to him, and when there was no reaction, he lightly nudged the boy with it on the side. It was only this that made Tommy look up at the toy, at the Techno, at the stuffed animal, and again at the boy. "Come on." Techno waved the bear urgently. "You can borrow him. For a while."

Tommy hesitantly reached for Steve, but still held him away, as if he didn't quite understand what else to do with him.

"I have Henry," he said, pushing the cow to his chest with his free hand.

Techno gasped in frustration. Really, why did everyone always have to make things difficult for him?

"I know. But Steve is... special." He shrugged and then tightened his hand on his thigh as his knees began to shake from the stress. "He's specially trained to be consoling. He's a supportive bear."

Tommy's eyes widened, this time in sheer amazement and fascination.

"Oh." He looked at the stuffed animal a little more carefully, settling it on his lap. "Really?"

"Yhm."

The boy's face lit up slightly with a smile.

"Thank you," he said, stroking the bear's face with such a tender gesture that Techno felt a surge of affection involuntarily. And then nausea, when the child looked at him, tilted his head, and as if nothing had ever happened, asked, "So you don't hate me anymore?"

He wasn't prepared for such a confrontation, not right now, and certainly not in such a direct way. But apparently the six-year-olds weren't very good at reading between the lines and seeing the deeper meaning of simple gestures. Or maybe Phil had just stuffed into his head those philosophies of sincere affection, openness and honesty. There was hope that no goldfish would ever die in the house again, because putting a new one in place of the carcass would be voted immediately.

At times, Techno wondered if his relationship with his own family had shared the fate of Milo the First. And if they had just tried to replace him with something new and strange, surprised that he noticed the difference.

Tommy was still staring at him expectantly and apparently had no intention of letting it go, no matter how much Techno looked away and twisted his fingers.

"It's not that I hate you," he finally muttered, so tense he had no idea how his mouth was even moving. "I just... I don't know." He sighed heavily as he pulled his feet up onto the mattress and pulled his knees high under his chin. "I guess sometimes I am mean for no reason."

If Phil were around, he would probably have instructed him not to talk about himself that way. But sometimes Phil loved them a little too much and forgave them a little too much. Certainly more than Techno could forgive himself.

He didn't even notice when Tommy moved closer. It was only when he felt a slight nudge on his arm that he turned his head and almost hit on the head with a soft plush. He instinctively moved away, but at the same moment the child slapped him on the chest with a stuffed cow. He looked down, just at the glistening plastic eyes, then a little higher, at his completely real eyes, glittering with eagerness and determination.

"For you." Tommy pushed the toy a little harder, pulling his hands back only when Techno put his arm around it and held it in place. "When I'm in a bad mood and I want to scream, I hug Henry and I feel better immediately. Give it a try." He encouraged, in a tone that betrayed that he wouldn't let go until he got what he wanted. Techno preferred not to test his patience.

He would lie to say he felt anything. Except maybe Henry's fur wasn't half as soft and fluffy as Steve's, and still smelled floral after Phil had finally managed to put it into the washing machine a few days earlier. But as he rested his cheek on the plush head, he had a perfect view of the boy's expression, his widening smile, his arms twitching with excitement, his hands clutching Steve's paws with such concern as if he were a real sentient creature.

The child leaned towards him, as if sensing a moment of weakness.

"Well, better?"

In some strange, inexplicable way - it was actually better. Even if nothing changed, no explanations were given and Techno didn't even apologize, not as he should, there was something reassuring about the whole situation. Maybe it was because he was tired of his own emotions, and the child's optimism seemed almost charming in all his naivety, but at that moment he could understand why Wilbur became so attached to the child so quickly and why he was so anxious to protect him.

"Yhm. A little," he admitted, straightening up a bit and shifting so that he could rest his back against the wall. Tommy immediately followed, settling right next to him, close enough for their arms to touch each other. Usually Techno didn't like it very much, not about anyone but Wilbur and Phil. But this time he figured maybe he could make an exception. Maybe even permanently. "Phil's right, you know?" He looked at the boy, and when Tommy tilted his head, clearly not understanding, he swallowed, trying to find the best words possible. "Even if you think now that he doesn't understand anything and is saying stupid things. At least I thought so sometimes, at the beginning." He started to twist Henry's tail in his fingers to find anything to do with his hands. "My mother didn't want me either," he blurted out, surprising even himself a little. "She left me and I don't even remember her. But I don't think it was my fault because I was about three, so I couldn't really do anything really wrong, right? So I guess maybe some people are just shitty parents all by themselves and would be even if you were perfect."

He had no idea what he was actually trying to achieve by saying all of this. He wasn't even sure if he was still trying to comfort the child, or if he was just confiding in him, to make himself feel better and to gain some confirmation that he was not guilty of all the evil in the world either. And he didn't know at all what kind of answer he was expecting and what he was entitled to count on at all. But he certainly hadn't included in the list of potential reactions that Tommy would look at him with such incomprehension and surprise.

"Wilbur said your mom died?" He asked more than he said, hugging Steve a little more.

Techno blinked.

"His mom died," he corrected. "When he was a baby."

Tommy, if possible, seemed even more shocked.

"You have different moms?"

"Yes?" Techno frowned. "Why did you think-?" He trailed off, suddenly realizing that he didn't really remember anyone talking to the child about it. Wilbur mentioned they were adopted, but maybe he never added that they were adopted separately? Phil was out of the question. Once, at the store, a salesman approached him saying that Wilbur was very much like him, and he just smiled broadly and said, "I know" Techno found it fucking absurd. (He found it a bit less so when the woman said the same about him.). "Didn't you know we weren't related?"

The boy shook his head.

"Wilbur says you're twins," he reported, and Techno struggled to keep from rolling his eyes. Although, deep down, he felt a little better with the thought that his brother still saw him that way after all. Even if he hasn't shown it at all lately.

"Yes, because it's... It's a joke. Because once Phil said-" He waved his hand. "Doesn't matter. Wilbur likes to say that, but we only met at Phil's."

"Oh." The child frowned, clearly considering something, then suddenly grinned broadly. "That's good!"

Techno felt a bit like a parent realizing that the house has been way too quiet for several minutes.

"Why?" He asked suspiciously, not sure if he really wanted to know the answer.

Tommy blushed, hiding most of his face in Steve's fur.

"Well, because I was afraid that I would never be his brother," he muttered, and Techno could have sworn that his heart stopped for a moment. "Not a real one. But if you can, so can I."

Techno would give a lot to never hear those words. And even more so to not feel so hurt by them. Because no matter what he told himself or what he wanted to believe with all his heart, it wasn't Tommy's fault at all. It was not his fault that Phil agreed to take care of him, it was not his fault that Wilbur had become very attached to him, it was not his fault that he was small and still wanted to act like any normal child. And if Techno wanted to get angry about any of these things, he had to acknowledge that he himself was the root cause of the problem and that there was something wrong with him.

"I suppose so," he muttered, looking down into Henry's black, glittering eyes. "I think you already are."

Tommy grinned, and for a moment, almost feeling the joy and excitement emanating from him, Techno thought maybe that's what it should be like. Maybe Tommy was going to be part of this family, maybe he was made for it, maybe he should have joined them from the beginning and stayed forever. Maybe his appearance was like a little miracle that no one expected.

Techno hated how much each of these possibilities did not fit 'not forever.'

"Tommy?" Someone knocked on the door and they both immediately turned their heads. "Can I come in?"

The boy, still beaming all over, nodded his head vigorously before realizing that no one would see him.

"Yes! You can!"

Phil appeared in the doorway, holding the tray with one hand and trying not to shake anything off of it.

"You didn't eat anything, so I made you waffles," he said, so focused on the mission of safely delivering food to the desk that it took a moment, when the plate and cup of hot chocolate were safely on the table between the crayons and notebooks, and he looked up and saw his son. "Oh." He blinked in surprise, looked between the boys, between Steve in Tommy's tight embrace and Henry, still on Techno's lap, then smirked as if he had witnessed the most adorable scene in the world, not a one-sided existential crisis. "I can see that I'm not needed here after all."

"You can stay!" Tommy quickly put in, because he hadn't apparently figured out yet that Phil should be forced out of the room at times, not the other way around. He shifted, pressing Techno tighter to his side to make more room on the bed. "But we don't have a stuffed animal for you."

"I'll make it somehow." Phil laughed and shook his head at the invitation. He reached out, ruffling Techno's hair before grabbing Tommy in the middle, pulling him into his lap, accompanied by a loud screeching sound. "I have you, right? Children are made just for that."

He rested his chin on the fair hair and while the child very loudly informed the world that he was not a child at all and did not wish to be treated as such (although he didn't seem particularly eager to do anything about it), he glanced at his son, whispering silently "Thank you".

Techno was pretty sure he didn't deserve any gratitude, and certainly not for any reason related to Tommy. Not when he had to look away and tighten his fingers on the mascot a little more so as not to get carried away by a sudden wave of jealousy. And not when the whole situation was solely his fault, even if no one knew it.

"I'm going to my room," he muttered, trying very hard to ignore the obvious disappointment on Phil's face. "My head hurts."

That, at least, wasn't entirely a lie - it was humming in his ears, though he was more than sure it had little to do with any physical cause. He had heard several times in his life that you could really get sick from stress, but to tell you the truth, he didn't really believe it. At least until he saw Wilbur throwing up in the school bathroom after taking his geography test a bit poorly and making himself believe his favorite teacher must hate him now. And maybe it was only now he understood, he really understood when he got back to bed, pressing his hands to his ears as if it could actually silence dozens of voices telling him that he had just lost, that he had lost his last chance, that he was no longer needed, and that someone had taken his place long ago, someone much better.

Sometime later he heard a door creak and quiet footsteps, and then the mattress next to him bent slightly and he felt a hand carefully stroking his hair. It was already too tangled to braid them into anything, and he had avoided shampoo (or at least a regular shower) for far too long, but Phil didn't seem to notice it at all, combing the pink strands with slow, rhythmic movements.

"Want to talk?" He asked, and immediately got a silent denial. "Should I go?"

Techno shook his head a second time.

"It's loud," he muttered, knowing it was enough to make him understand. "In my head."

The hand froze for a moment, then slid lower, onto his back. The fingers started to move a little faster, in a much more precise way, and Techno closed his eyes, trying to focus on the individual letters. Over the past years, he had learned to recognize Phil's handwriting no matter what the situation. He knew his 'T' was always a bit longer than the other letters, the 'E' looked like an 'L' at first, and the 'U' almost closed at the top and looked almost identical to the 'O'. But even if he knew exactly what was going to be written, he always held his breath for a moment, quite automatically.

"What are the voices saying?"

He didn't answer. But Phil sat with him for another hour anyway until he finally fell asleep, a shallow, restless, and very cold sleep.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Here, a little more comfort for you all. It's a Christmas gift. With @Katricia help! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno couldn't tell if he had somehow managed to sleep through all three alarm clocks in the morning, or if he had turned off all of them one by one, and made a very deliberate decision to flip over and sleep again. All he knew was that when he woke up on monday, he was a good two hours late for school and his cell phone was completely useless on the cupboard.

At first he considered pretending he hadn't noticed anything and taking the opportunity until someone tried to force him out of bed, but after a few minutes of listening to the silence he realized that he wouldn't be able to sleep anyway. Not when it occurred to him that maybe everyone had just forgotten about him and hadn't even noticed that he hadn't shown up for breakfast.

The house was quiet, which was extremely rare. The door to Tommy's room was wide open, but the boy himself was nowhere to be seen, nor was his backpack, usually tossed casually against the wall. It didn't make Techno feel any better, if possible, his stomach twisted even more. But there was a rustling of water and a murmur of voices downstairs, and after a moment's hesitation, as silently as he could, he descended the stairs, passed the empty living room, and stopped at the kitchen door.

Phil was just finishing rinsing some vegetables, humming something under his breath, not looking the slightest bit worried by the fact that he had sent one less child to school than usual. He wiped his hands on his apron, turned to put the strainer on the counter, and jumped when he noticed that he was no longer alone.

"God, kiddo!" He put a hand to his chest, taking a deep breath. "Really, you have to stop doing this to me, I'm not twenty anymore. One day you will put me in the grave."

Techno knew these were just jokes and he shouldn't take them personally. But coupled with the distinct dark circles under Phil's eyes and how pale his face had turned recently, it made him feel even worse about standing barefoot in the doorway, sleepy and disheveled, instead of trying to at least pretend he's alright and give Phil no more reason to worry.

"I didn't go to school," he blurted, leaning his arm against the door frame, stealthily scraping paint off with his fingernail.

Phil nodded as he began to lay out the vegetables on the counter.

"It's hard not to notice," he said, his voice as far from any complaint as possible. "Don't worry, I called school this morning to excuse you from your classes."

Oh. Okay, that explained the dead alarm clock. But it raised a whole host of other questions, including the fundamental one:

"Why?"

Phil glanced over his shoulder at him, eyebrows raised.

"Because you looked like you needed it," he said, as if explaining something quite obvious. "Did you eat something?"

Techno, a bit baffled, shook his head and pressed himself tighter against the doorframe, hugging himself around shoulders.

"I'm not hungry," he muttered, though he was sure his stomach was slowly starting to digest itself. As was to be expected, Phil wasn't at all satisfied with this answer.

"You have to eat something." He reached for a cloth to wipe his hands, already on his way to the refrigerator. "I'll make you something warm and you can eat as much as you can, but you must at least try. How about that?"

It wasn't really a question, and he didn't give his son a choice, not on this one point, so Techno nodded and a moment later he was sitting at the table, sluggishly pushing the scrambled eggs on the plate. He tried to force a few chunks into himself, but even though his stomach was rumbling, his throat was too tight to swallow anything, and eventually he put his fork down, briefly hiding his face in his hands. When he looked up again, Phil was staring at him intently, leaning his hip against the table where he was already making dinner. He seemed thoughtful, definitely more sad than angry, but Techno wasn't sure if that was a good sign. Because Phil should be angry. He should have been absolutely furious, he had every right to do so and a very good reason, and he had been furious two days before, and Techno still hadn't done anything to deserve forgiveness. Worse! He acted horribly and instead of apologizing, he accused him of having no idea what he was doing, and almost bluntly said that he didn't care if Phil would have problems with his behavior or not. He definitely didn't deserve to be still worried about, comforted and made sure that he didn't starve to death.

He stared at his plate, pressing his hand tightly on his knee to stop it trembling.

"What?" He grunted and immediately aimed himself a mental kick. Could he really not be so horribly rude for once? Especially when he had no reason to do so?

Phil took no notice of his tone and just shrugged.

"Nothing." He smiled slightly before going back to chopping carrots. "I'm just glad you came to see me."

Techno frowned, uncertainly looking up.

"I thought you were mad at me." He said more than asked, catching himself holding his breath at the hesitation in Phil's face.

"I am," he finally admitted, after an unpleasant silence. "But that doesn't mean I'll yell at you every time I see you. Or that I don't want to see you at all." He turned his head and just stared at his kid in silence for a moment before he shifted a little, pushing the plank and knife away. "Come here." He tapped the vacant spot with his hand. "You'll help me with the potatoes. Only you can do such miracles with them."

Techno wasn't sure if he could concentrate enough at the moment to cut the vegetables relatively straight, let alone do anything else with them. But he had no way of refusing, so after a second hesitation, he walked over to the counter and, a little shakily, grabbed the knife as he set to work.

The atmosphere in the kitchen was... strange. He had no idea how else to define the clearly palpable tension combined with how relaxed Phil seemed. He was humming under his breath again, engrossed in his tasks as if everything was fine, as if they were spending a perfectly normal day together, as if Techno still had no scabs on his knuckles after he had knocked Dream to the ground for no reason.

He put down the knife when his hands began to tremble so much that it was no longer safe to hold anything.

"I'm sorry," he said, as loud and confident as he could, and he was sure it would be over, that he couldn't find any words to express how sorry he was and why he had done something so stupid in the first place. But then Phil looked at him and it was obvious that no apology, even the most sincere, was enough. Because Phil knew without it that he was sorry. He just wanted to understand. And it was really hard to say no to him. So even though his voice was trembling and his throat was dry and tight, he made himself go on. "I know I fucked up everything. I didn't want to- I don't know what was I thinking. There was just too much of everything, and somehow- And Dream stood closest and he said something stupid and I-" He took a deep breath, clenching his hands tighter on the sleeves of his sweatshirt, staring at the floor. He promised himself not to cry, but he couldn't help how blurry the image before his eyes was. "And I know it's not an excuse, but I didn't think then, and I just had to *do something*. I- And I'm really sorry. I never wanted you to have problems because of me and be ashamed of me." He sniffed and quickly raised his hand to wipe his eyes. "And I'm sorry for being so unbearable lately."

He didn't look up, but after a few seconds of almost painful silence, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"You're not 'unbearable'." Phil moved a little closer, leaning in a bit, trying to catch his eye. "But something is clearly bothering you and I would like to help somehow. I wish you would trust me."

And maybe it wasn't a big deal. Nothing Techno hadn't known before. But for some reason, hearing it said with such sincere concern made Techno feel that something inside him was breaking and he no longer had the strength to hold back tears.

He still didn't dare look at Phil. But somehow his body reacted on its own, and before he could realize it, he took the last missing step towards him, wrapping his arms tightly around him and hiding his face in his sweater. Almost immediately, he was pulled even closer, locked in an embrace that he would most likely never get out of.

"Wilbur doesn't want me anymore," he muttered, sniffing again. His cheeks were already wet, but he couldn't care less about it. "He doesn't want to be my brother anymore."

Phil's hands slid over his back, just as they always did when he needed it, as if it didn't matter that he was probably the worst child in the world and had ruined everything. Because maybe it didn't really matter. Not right now, not for Phil.

"Why do you think so?"

Techno's fingers tightened.

"He only cares about Tommy now," he said, trying very hard not to sound like the jealous child he was. "And he doesn't talk to me anymore, not even in school, and he doesn't even pretend to like me anymore. And I know it's no wonder, because Tommy is..." He paused, looking for the right phrase, but each of them suddenly seemed inappropriate. Tommy was what? Better? Nicer? Funnier? "They get along well. And I can only sit in the room and be boring and I beat our friend and now probably no one will want to know me- But he always said that we're stuck with each other and that nothing will change that and I thought... I guess I believed it a little too much."

He pulled back a little to wipe his nose with his sleeve, and Phil immediately took advantage of it to put his hands on his cheeks and gently lift his face. He looked sad, more sad than Techno had seen him in the last few weeks.

"Oh, Techno..." He sighed, and Techno immediately regretted speaking at all. He didn't want anyone to feel sorry for him.

He sniffed again to pull himself together.

"I know I'm whining," he tried to joke, but Phil just shook his head, taking him back to him again.

"Not at all. It's just... I had no idea you really felt this way."

Techno rested his cheek on his shoulder.

"But I told you..." he muttered before he could bite his tongue.

Phil rocked him gently.

"I know," he admitted. "And I'm so sorry that I didn't take it seriously. I should listen carefully before I complain that you're not telling me anything."

Techno raised his head a bit to be able to look at him.

"Sometimes I really don't."

"Sometimes you shouldn't have to. Listen." He put his hands on his shoulders, pushing him away from him, leaning in so that he could look him straight in the eye. This time Techno didn't try to run away from it. "I know everything looks... difficult right now. But nothing that cannot be repaired has happened. Dream is your friend, I'm sure he'll give you a chance to explain yourself and apologize."

Techno would give a lot to be so sure. Dream was, after Wilbur, the only person he ever called friend and really meant it, even if he was weird and a bit out of touch with reality. And the fact that he had taken all the blame on himself to get him out of trouble was definitely a good sign. The problem was, Techno wasn't sure how he would behave in a similar situation, and he felt hellishly out of place expecting something from others that he probably wouldn't have been able to do.

But he couldn't admit it, not when Phil apparently still somehow believed in him, so he just asked:

"What if it's not enough?"

Phil frowned, clearly wondering, and raised his hand to brush his hair behind his ear.

"You can't make him forgive you," he admitted. "But I really do believe he'll understand, at least a little. He's a good boy. Annoying and stubborn, maybe," he made a significant face, and Techno felt that he himself was smiling involuntarily too. "But I think your friendship means a lot to him and he won't cut it off that quickly."

Techno nodded slowly.

"Maybe so," he muttered, not a little more sure of it, but with a little more hope. "It doesn't hurt to try."

Phil smiled at him, but then his expression grew serious, placing both hands on his cheeks.

"You want me to talk to Wilbur?" He asked, and no matter what, it was a really fucking tempting proposition. To leave everything in his hands, to have someone to transfer all responsibility to and to blame. But at the same time, it was the worst possible option. For exactly the same reasons.

"No. I will do it myself, when I'll feel better" he assured Phil, knowing full well that such a moment would never come.

Because what would he say? 'I know you have a better option now, but please choose me?' He still had a little dignity, and he intended to stick to it as long as possible.

Phil looked unconvinced.

"You're sure? I can't solve it for you, but sometimes it's easier to listen to an outsider."

Techno shook his head, taking a step back.

"He'll think you're on my side," he said, suddenly feeling a little ill with everything he just said. Because even if he really needed it, Wilbur would be quite right to call him selfish right now. "He probably thinks so anyway."

Phil raised his eyebrows.

"I literally grounded you and I still have your phone," he recalled, which would have made a little sense if it weren't for one detail.

"Yhm, and you're comforting me now," he rolled his eyes. "Indeed, you are very impartial."

For some reason, Phil seemed almost offended by the statement.

"I can be angry and still care for you. It's not mutually exclusive."

If Techno had a little more energy, he would probably have laughed. But he barely had the strength to continue talking, so he just shook his head, making a meaningful face.

"Sometimes you really forget that we haven't lived with you forever, do you?" He asked, Phil's face softening immediately.

"I think so, sometimes," he sighed. And then suddenly he looked at him as if he were something very delicate that could burst at any moment. "Are you sure you don't want me to try to talk to him?"

Techno wasn't sure. About anything at the moment. But he knew that was not the correct answer, so he tried to force himself to smile at least a little.

"I'll be fine," he promised, and hesitated, fingering the sleeves of his blouse again. "I... I think I'm just a little jealous."

Saying it out loud cost him more than he could have guessed, and it didn't make him feel much better when he finally let it out. And certainly not when Phil looked at him closely and, as if reading his mind, asked:

"Jealous or scared?"

Sometimes Techno could swear that his father was using some strange, perhaps forbidden magic to understand him inside and out. And he couldn't decide whether he was more angry or thankful for it.

"Both," he admitted, after a moment's hesitation. "I think."

He was absolutely sure of it.

Phil opened his mouth, clearly getting ready to say something else, but Techno already turned on his heel and started toward the door.

"I'll go take a bath," he said over his shoulder, trying to sound as carefree as possible given the situation. "I guess... I stink a bit."

Definitely more than 'a little', to tell the truth. Though he only realized this when he got out of the shower and picked up his clothes from the floor to throw them into the laundry basket. When he was little he didn't have the slightest problem with walking in the same things until it literally started to fall apart. And it was clearly one of those things that he quickly got used to again as soon as he was given the opportunity.

He felt a little better, in fresh clothes and with his wet hair wrapped in a towel. He even managed to bring himself to change the sheets and sweep his room a little before he went downstairs again and sat hesitantly at the kitchen table. Theoretically, he had just heard that he didn't have to hide in his room and should even go out to people, but still he was a little afraid that no one would like to put up with his company, even when he tried very hard to act as normal as possible. But Phil just smiled at him, broad and sincere, and handed him a piece of peeled carrot.

They didn't talk much, each occupied with their own thoughts, but the mere presence of another, friendly person had something nice and warm about it after all the recent events, after foggy days and sleepless, cold nights. Techno figured he could spend all eternity like this, in this somewhat lazy atmosphere, not forced to do anything and as safe as he hasn't felt in a long time. At one point, he couldn't remember exactly when, he hid his head in his arms stretched out on the table and he must have actually dozed off for a moment, because the next thing he knew was a hand on his shoulder and Phil's face, bent over him.

"I'm going for Tommy and Wilbur," he said, carefully brushing his son's hair from his forehead. "Do you want to go with me?"

Techno rubbed his eyes, not sure at first what exactly was going on.

"Na-ah," he muttered vaguely, suppressing a yawn, but then something occurred to him and he grabbed Phil by the sleeve before he could remove his hand. "Wait. Can I... Can I go and stay for a while?" I mean..., he added quickly when met with a confused look. "Because Dream must have been in school. I wanted to... Maybe I could find him and talk for a while. To apologize, I mean. I know I wasn't supposed to leave, but I'll be right back after that, really, I promise." He began to tighten his sweatshirt sleeve nervously in his fingers. "I don't want to do it during the break, and if I have to avoid him all day tomorrow, then... it's probably even worse."

Phil watched him closely, patiently waiting for him to finish before he thought for a moment and nodded.

"Okay," he agreed, and Techno felt a small part of the invisible weight drop off his shoulders. His father could never be particularly strict, in fact, he couldn't be strict at all, in no way. It was good to know that things still hadn't gone bad enough for him to start. -"For a while. And you'll come home on the next bus."

Techno nodded, not even carefully listening to what he was agreeing to. For the moment he had much more serious worries on his mind. Like the vision of facing someone he last saw in the hospital he sent him to, right after he literally pounced on him for one stupid, innocent comment. He already felt that it wouldn't be a particularly pleasant conversation. But at least he wouldn't have to try to make the apology sound sincere - he really did feel bloody guilty,

and the fact that for the past two days he had hardly thought about it at all, preoccupied with self-pity, only made matters worse. He hadn't even asked Wilbur if he knew how Dream was feeling, he hadn't taken any interest in it at all, he didn't care at all, as if Dream was a stranger. He wouldn't be surprised if Dream didn't even want to talk to him, let alone hear his explanations. Techno probably wouldn't want to listen to them either, if it was him.

Still sitting in the car, nervously turning the zipper of his jacket in his fingers, he managed to convince himself that the whole plan was absolutely pointless, he would definitely get a well-deserved punch right in the teeth, and the only right solution was to change school, name and accent, just to be sure. But he couldn't say it aloud, not after Phil had pulled into the parking lot and turned to smile at him, which was probably supposed to give him courage.

"It'll be okay," Phil said, reaching out to ruffle his hair.

Techno was absolutely sure he was going to throw up.

He had to wait a few more minutes before the students finally started arriving in the courtyard. He was just finishing picking a third hole in the ground with his shoe deep enough for someone to trip over it when his eye caught the green stain, then caught a familiar laugh from dozens of others.

He pulled away from the wall, leaving part of his lungs on it, judging by how suddenly it was hard for him to breathe. He tried to call out, but his throat was tight and it was only after a long moment of maneuvering between the students that he actually managed to make any sound.

"Dream...!"

It was still not quite a scream, rather a very loud choked whisper, but strangely enough, it was enough for the boy to turn his head and look around. And then two more boys.

Sapnap saw him first, and anger immediately replaced the amusement on his face. He tensed, pausing and moving in front of his friend as if he were planning to act as his human shield. George, for a change, tucked his shoulders up and took a step back, and if he was a cat he would most likely tuck his tail up and fold his ears back. Dream was the only one who did not move. He had his jacket over his shoulders, a large bruise on his cheek, a split lip, and his left hand, in a cast covered with colorful signatures, was resting on a sling over his neck. It looked exactly as you'd expect, yet Techno felt puzzled and bloody overwhelmed anyway.

And then, quite suddenly, Dream grinned broadly.

"Techno!" He called, over the noise of the crowd, and stepped closer, avoiding Sapnap as if he hadn't noticed him at all. "Finally! I already thought your father had murdered you after all!"

Techno was more than surprised. Happy to not be alone in this, judging from George's expression, but he would certainly have felt a lot more confident if he had kept up with the situation a little more. He hesitated, still feeling Sapnap's very unfavorable gaze on him, but finally nodded slowly.

"I survived somehow," he replied, all the while waiting for Dream to do something a little more normal, react adequately, yell at him, or laugh at him in the face, saying that it was a pity, because everything would be better if he finally disappeared.

But the boy still kept smiling, standing close enough that if he wanted to, he could easily hit Techno as hard as possible. Which, for some reason, he didn't do. Maybe he damaged something else besides his hand? Maybe he hit his head a little too hard, or they gave him some really strong drugs and he didn't quite remember what happened?

"Good, cause my parents must have scared him a bit with their lawyer. But take it easy, they do that to everyone." He waved his hand, rolling his eyes, then winced slightly. "But you could reply to my messages, you know?"

Even the resentment in his voice was too theatrical to be believed. Techno was beginning to seriously consider whether it was he himself having some hallucinations.

"Um... Phil took my phone away," he muttered, shifting a bit as he tried to get as far as possible from Sappnap and his distanced murder attempts.

Dream frowned, and for a moment Techno was absolutely sure he was going to ask why he just didn't use his 'spare phone'. But he must have figured out somewhere along the way that something might be wrong with this plan, because in the end he just shrugged.

"Ah. Okay, let it be," he decided graciously. Not that anyone was complaining. Techno was ready to accept any forgiveness, even the absurd one. "But you missed an awful lot. Hey! He turned to the other friends. "Go without me! Guys, I will catch up with you!"

And without waiting for an answer (and Sappnap definitely had a lot to say about what he thought about the idea) he grabbed Techno's elbow, pulling him in the opposite direction.

Techno didn't protest. If he was just being led to the place of execution, he was ready to accept it with dignity and honor. He was definitely not prepared for the fact that as soon as they separated themselves a bit from the rest of the students, Dream moved even closer, practically jiggling in place with excitement.

"George has finally started talking to me," he whispered, looking around vigilantly as if everyone was just waiting to find out the secret. "For real. And sometimes he even messages me first!"

Techno nodded completely automatically, without a second's thought. His body was still suspended in anticipation of the blow, and his thinking was not his strongest for the time being.

"I see..."

Dream, meanwhile, seemed to wind up more and more with every second.

"And when I ask what he's doing, he sometimes sends me selfies. Wait, I'll show you." He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and ran his finger across the screen for a moment

before proudly holding it under his nose. "Look." Techno stared at the screen where the most bored, emotionless face a human could make, and which George had mastered to perfection, was staring at him. Then he looked at his friend, flushed and radiant with delight. And he concluded that the world had obviously gone crazy.

"Dream-" he began, but didn't get a chance to finish.

"And he told me how he was on vacation at camp and they went mushroom picking and he collected the most, but then he was late for dinner and he didn't get any."

"Dream."

"And then everyone except him fell ill and had to go to the hospital, because it turned out that he was wrong and it wasn't edible mushrooms. And then-"

"Dream!" He almost shouted, and this time it finally had some effect: the boy fell silent and glared at him with obvious resentment, evidently angry for such a brutal interruption of such a fascinating story. Techno promised himself somehow to make it up to him. Maybe even listening to the end of all George's adventures throughout the summer. But first he had to shake off some of the blame while he could still bear the weight of it. "Dream, I..." He swallowed, clenching his hands into fists and taking a deep, intentionally calming breath. Didn't help. But it was enough for him to finally blur, "I'm sorry."

It didn't sound exactly what he wanted it to be. It came out too shaky and hurried, and not even half as convincing as it should have been. But it didn't really matter, because Dream looked like he didn't understand what he meant at all.

"Oh." He glanced down at his plaster cast. "For that?"

Techno nodded.

"Yeah. And..." He raised a hand to his face, pointing significantly at his own cheek. "And all the rest. And... And in general."

He hung his shoulders, waiting for the verdict in the stretched silence. Dream frowned at something silently, but even that was too much drama, and the corners of his mouth twitched slightly in a muffled smile. Then, as if nothing had happened, he shrugged.

"Okay."

Techno blinked. He blinked a second time. He would have blinked a third time, but he was too shocked even for that.

"Okay?" He repeated, feeling anger slowly grow in the place of astonishment. Not the blinding fury he felt then, on the beach, but a more desperate need for the world to finally graciously start to cooperate. So that things finally make sense, that things start to be normal, so that he can just do what he should and feel better. "I fucking beat you up!" He almost shouted, and struggled to lower his voice a little. "For nothing! This is not 'okay!'"

Dream seemed genuinely offended. Which in a sense would have been understandable if he hadn't opened his mouth right now and spoiled the whole effect:

"First of all, if I wanted to, I would knock you down with one kick, I restrained myself not to hurt you," he huffed. "And second, it actually turned out well. Seriously." He shrugged. "I mean, my parents are a little angry and now they think I have some kind of 'problems with aggression'," he made a quote with his fingers, "or something, because I told them I hit you first. But George thinks it was really cool. That I took the blame, not that you beat me. And he even signed the cast!"

He pulled his hand out of the sling so that he could point his finger at the place of honor where George had scribbled his name a little lopsidedly. It was absolutely obvious that as soon as the plaster was finally removed it would immediately hit the wall framed or locked in a display case like the ultimate trophy.

Techno didn't have the strength to pretend any longer that he understood any of this.

"I broke your arm, but you're not mad because George now likes you?" He assured himself, deeply accepting the defeat of reason in the face of the power of the absurd. In fact, he wasn't sure why he even assumed that anything about his friend might be perfectly normal for once.

Dream hesitated, looking for the first time that day as if he really meant to take it seriously.

"You know..." He rubbed his neck with his free hand and cleared his throat. "I don't know what it's like to be you. Not that you're some kind of 'different' or something like that", he added quickly. "But... You know. Lots of bad things, lots of bad memories... I don't always understand what you mean or why you're acting... like this. But I'm not blind, and you've been so weird lately, so I guess you had a reason. Probably some important one. And you don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to. Because seriously, I probably won't understand it anyway." He smiled apologetically. "But if you need anything, go ahead, just ask. We're buddies, aren't we?"

Techno didn't answer right away. Not because the question was particularly difficult or required any kind of thought. He just hadn't expected it at all, and certainly not in a context other than "If we're friends, why did you do it?"

He was getting used to the thought that he really did have people in his life who would always at least try to understand. But he had never met someone before who simply acknowledged that some things couldn't be explained and didn't mind at all.

He smiled slightly, and for the first time in a long time he breathed fully.

"We are," he admitted, and he really meant it. Even if Dream immediately took advantage of his moment of weakness to throw his healthy arm around his neck, which he absolutely hated.

"And if I called in the middle of the night and said I was in jail, what would you do?"

He slipped out of his grip, playfully (and a little as a test) poking his friend in the ribs.

"Laugh."

Dream rolled his eyes, but he didn't look particularly concerned.

"Sapnap said he'd plant more evidence on the police, so you win anyway."

And in some strange sense, as absurd as the whole situation, Techno had the feeling that he actually won something this one time.

Chapter End Notes

Phil: You're in big trouble and I'm very angry with you. I'll have to be more strict from now on 😞

Also Phil, about five seconds later: Oh no no no please don't cry! I still love you, I promise...! 😞😞😞

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Sooo... The first chapter in the new year! New year, old me and all that. If someone had told me that in 2022 I would still write a fic from a year ago... But at least I still like it, that's always something XD

And @Katricia is still helping me! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno came home by the nearest bus, partly to keep his word and not to abuse Phil's goodwill, partly because fifteen minutes of listening to every day in George's life was enough to make him want to throw himself under the nearest car. But somehow he got home in one piece and in such a good mood that even the idea of meeting his brother suddenly seemed much less overwhelming to him. Or at least until he kicked off his boots and jacket and walked into the living room.

Wilbur, sprawled on the couch, legs stretched along the back, looked up from the phone and straightened up, looking as tense and stressed as Techno himself, frozen and motionless against the far wall. They just stared at each other for a moment, neither bothering to break the silence. There was a clatter of dishes and the sizzling of oil from the kitchen, and upstairs something hit the floor rhythmically over and over again, most likely the ball that Tommy had gotten a few days earlier, and which he didn't want to take to the garden cause 'it might get dirty'.

Finally, when Techno was absolutely sure that his stomach had gotten so high in his throat that it was starting to endanger his life, Wilbur cleared his throat.

"You made up with Dream." It wasn't a question, it was a statement. He twirled the phone in his fingers and, seeing his brother's slightly surprised expression, lifted it up and waved it slightly. "He wrote in the group chat."

Techno wasn't sure if he should take it as a gesture of peace, or rather an introduction to the statement that he didn't deserve forgiveness at all, so he just nodded.

"Yhm," he muttered, then frowned. "You guys have a group chat?"

"Well..." Wilbur looked confused, tucking the phone between his knees as if that would magically avoid the subject. "Kinda? From Friday?" He blushed slightly, biting his lip. "But you don't have a phone now anyway, so, well..."

While deep down Techno thought his brother fully deserved a moment of embarrassment, he didn't feel much like hearing lame excuses right now.

"Sure," he said dryly, coming closer. He tried to look confident (this is his home too, damn it! He had a right to be here!), But he hesitated and only after Wilbur shifted a bit did he take the opposite corner of the couch.

A few weeks ago, he wouldn't have waited a second. A few weeks ago, he would have jumped over the backrest and crushed his brother into the cushion, then denied everything when Phil came in to see how they could go from nothing to attempted murder in two seconds. But now he felt uncomfortable being in the same room at all, and judging by the way Wilbur nervously tugged at his socks, he wasn't alone in that. Which, in some weird way, was quite comforting. Until now, he constantly had the impression that his brother simply didn't want to see him and wanted nothing to do with him, but maybe something had changed? Maybe none of them had a clue how to break this nightmare atmosphere and if they dared to try it, everything would become simpler, more normal, the way it was before?

Techno was definitely not good at it. But apologizing was not easy for him, and he had somehow managed to do it twice today, so maybe he should just take a risk and hope silently that the stupid's luck works this time.

"Hey, you know... Are Dream and George...?" He paused meaningfully, raising his eyebrows. He was tempted to give himself a mental kick for choosing that subject, but at the same moment Wilbur left his socks alone and turned to look at him. Techno didn't even realize he missed his smile so much.

"Nobody has a clue, but they should get over with it, or Sapnap will kill them eventually," he said, shaking his head slightly. "They're unbearable. I mean, Dream is. George is..." He made a vague gesture "Himself. Like always. You know..."

Techno knew. And he still had the very bored face in the photo before his eyes, so he nodded without thinking for a second. He wanted to add something else, anything, to keep the conversation going, so as not to return to that goddamn, unbearable silence, but Phil appeared in the room carrying a pot of tea.

"Set the table, Wilbur," he asked, glancing over to the couch and smiling at the sight of his other child. "Oh, you're back." He ruffled Wilbur's hair as he passed by - mumbling something about injustice, slavery, and revolution - but he never took his eyes off Techno. He clearly had high hopes that the boy hadn't run straight upstairs to barricade himself in the room, but there was still an uncertain note in his voice. "And how did it go?"

Techno shrugged, stretching lazily. He had the feeling that all his muscles had turned to jelly in the last few days and he had to learn to move them all over again.

"Good. He's not mad at me," he replied, and seeing that it was definitely not enough, he half-jokingly added, "It turns out George likes weak, whiny people or something."

Phil frowned.

"That's... good," he said slowly, clearly confused. "I guess. I think so. I'm not sure I want to understand..."

Techno leaned his head back against the back of the couch.

"Does it mean I'm not in trouble anymore?" He asked innocently, not expecting any other answer than an incredulous look.

"Absolutely not. *I'm* still angry." Phil tapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Go help your brother before he actually starts overthrowing governments."

"And you think *I* would stop him?" He snorted, but, albeit a little reluctantly, got up from the couch and dragged his feet towards the kitchen.

Usually it took Wilbur exactly ten seconds to set the table, mostly because he didn't care if the cutlery was in the right place and the glasses were one set. Now, however, he was not only arranging everything much more carefully, but also seemed ready to bring a ruler from the room to make sure that the fork was at the right angle and the spoons were on the same level. Techno didn't try to rush him, he could feel his gaze on him, and he was absolutely sure that there was more to this sudden surge of pedantism. Indeed, after a long moment of turning the plate in all directions, Wilbur straightened, resting his hands on the chair.

"You gave Tommy Steve," he said, as if he were waiting for an answer and closing the topic at the same time. Techno shrugged, very pleased that he could still fake great interest in the glasses.

"Borrowed it," he corrected. Then, not knowing exactly what he was trying to justify himself for, he added, "He was sad."

Because of me, he added silently, which definitely no one needed to know. And certainly not Wilbur, rocking on his heels, staring down at his hands.

"You were, too," he observed, hesitantly looking up. "Lately." He hesitated and grimaced, embarrassed. "And I wasn't really trying to help."

At first, Techno wanted to deny it, say nothing happened, that he didn't even notice the lack of any support. But the lie somehow didn't want to go down his throat, so in the end he just sighed and nodded.

"Not really," he admitted. Then he saw his brother's expression and quickly added, "It happens."

Wilbur shifted uneasily, beginning to rub one foot against the other.

"It's better now?" He asked and, for the second time, Techno really wanted to calm him down. Only somehow he didn't know how to do it.

"Not really, no," he sighed, glancing down at the plates and cutlery. He would have given a lot, so that his biggest problem would still be that a stuffed cow took his place at the table.

He would give a lot to still be sure that he still had a place in his own family.

He shuddered as he suddenly felt someone else's hand on his. Wilbur didn't withdraw his hand.

"Listen-"

Whatever he wanted to say, he had no chance to finish a second time.

"Wil!" Tommy ran down the stairs, stamping as loud as an army, not one six-year-old with very small feet. "Wil, Wil, Wil-! Techno!" He rejoiced, noticing the other boy, and he was the target of the attack immediately. "Look!"

He held up the piece of paper, but as he was bouncing in place all the time, Techno had to lean down and narrow his eyes to make out the colored lines of the letters in the uneven beads. Somewhat lopsided, but no miracles were expected, and the mere fact that Tommy had found the patience to fill the entire page definitely counted as a small success.

Techno had absolutely no idea why he would be happy about it and was about to say it aloud, but he remembered in time that being mean to the child had not done him any good so far. Especially when Wilbur was right there, clearly listening for the answer.

"Mhm..." he muttered, stepping back a bit because the boy almost jumped on his feet. "Nice."

Tommy beamed even more, pressing the paper tightly to his chest.

"Phil says a little more and I can write the entire letter! To Tubbo!" He added, as if someone could have any doubts about it. "You can help me send it, right? Right?"

Techno winced, mostly at the thought of the drawings still hidden among the books.

"Sure. Why not."

"And I can almost read!" The boy continued, lifting his chin proudly. Apparently, he decided to take the opportunity to enumerate all his successes in life. There was a serious concern that at any moment he would start showing off again with what grace he was doing flips. "Just a little bit. But I can!"

He looked around the living room, clearly looking for something to show how good Phil was at teaching him things he should have learned in school, but was busy punching the eraser with a pencil. His eyes fell on the certificates hanging on the wall, and his eyes flashed instantly as he ran closer, on his tiptoes to see better. He frowned, but no matter how focused he kept his gaze on the beginning of the line, increasingly frustrated.

Wilbur stood beside him, patting him condescendingly on the head.

"That's a lot of long words. Find yourself something simpler."

Tommy glared at him, puffed up his cheeks, and pouted even more. He moves his lips, spelling out successive words silently, unable to put them together in any way, until he finally comes across one familiar.

"Techno! This one is yours!" He rejoiced, jumping up and down so that he could tap his finger on the carefully calligraphed name. Techno instinctively wanted to reprimand him for it, but before he could do it, the child was already busy deciphering the next characters. Then it tilted its head and looked at him in amazement. "Your middle name is Blade?"

Techno grimaced slightly.

"Yhm. Apparently..." he muttered, though, to tell the truth, he was absolutely sure that no one in their right mind would name their child that way. It was also not particularly normal for a child to be abandoned on the church steps, but he preferred not to think about it too much.

He didn't remember the moment it was found, or practically anything from before his fourth birthday. But he once asked Nate where his name actually came from and found out that, apparently, was how he chose to introduce himself. *Techno Blade*. And someone high up and in control of the documents that will serve him throughout his life decided that it actually made sense, why not.

Techno hated officials.

But Tommy was still far too young to fully understand the enormity of his tragedy and sympathize with him sincerely.

"Phiiii! Techno has two cool names and I have none! It's not fair!"

Apart from the scratching of old wounds and the defeat of bureaucracy, the dinner passed in an exceptionally pleasant atmosphere. Techno didn't say much, but he really listened to the conversation and nodded at the right moments, agreeing with Tommy that Tubbo should absolutely be allowed to keep bees in his room and no one should stop him from doing so. And even if Wilbur hadn't tried to talk to him in private, either after dinner or in the evening, or when Phil tried hard to put them in bed ("Nobody in this house is going to be called 'Kraken', Wilbur, stop giving him such ideas."), Techno was completely content with the hope that maybe they will come back to it in a while. Maybe tomorrow, maybe in a few days, maybe if he shows that he's really trying and can be better, that he can be a good brother...

He liked the plan, even if it was very hesitant and practically independent of it. He was patient, he could wait a bit.

"I'm counting to three and I want to see you in bed." Phil, apparently, couldn't say the same about himself. Not surprisingly, considering that it was almost ten o'clock, neither of his children were asleep yet, and the youngest seemed to have gotten a surge of energy with the rise of the moon. "One... your own bed, Wilbur," he noted in a slightly sharper tone, and a pair of feet immediately thumped the floor as the boy ran from room to room, slamming doors along the way. "Two... three" He waited for a few seconds, as if expecting that at any moment something would disturb something with the newly fought silence, and when the walls had not started shaking, the ceiling banging, and no one remembered yet that he had to go to the bathroom urgently, he sighed softly with relief. "Turn off the lights and goodnight. Techno, you too."

Techno grimaced, but obediently put the book down and turned off the bedside lamp, checking beforehand that he still had a flashlight under his pillow. He wasn't sleepy, and he definitely wasn't going to lie down another night staring at the ceiling, thinking about the worst possible things, not when he could use that time to be at least minimally productive. But, for the sake of everyone in the house, he at least decided to pretend.

"Good night, Phil," he called again, trying to sound sleepy.

"Good night, kiddo."

"Good night, Techno!" Tommy exclaimed, apparently deciding that half a minute without the right to speak was way too much and he needed to catch up quickly.

Techno knew all too well what face Phil made at that moment; something between deep resignation, fatigue, and the thought "I should adopt a puppy instead...". The vision did not stop him in any way from shouting back:

"Good night, Tommy."

"Good night, Phil." Wilbur, naturally, couldn't be left out. "Good night, Techno."

"Good night, Wilbur."

"Good night, Wilbur!"

"Good night, child."

"I'm not a child!"

"My God..." Phil sighed heavily, and though there was a hint of amusement even in his voice, everyone agreed immediately that it was better not to push him further. "Good night, everyone, and let's be done with that. And if one of you gets out of bed... I don't know what I'm going to do, but you don't want to check."

Techno rolled his eyes. They couldn't take the threat seriously even if he tried very hard, and it so happened that he didn't try at all. But Phil's face had been a bit too pale lately, and the shadows under his eyes were way too dark, and it would be sheer cruelty to take away his chance for at least a moment of peace and rest, so he kept all the comments to himself.

He rolled over to his side, wrapping the duvet tighter around him. It had been a while since he had been so relaxed, since the silence seemed pleasant to him, not overwhelming, since his head was such a quiet place, with no dozen voices repeating the same lies over and over again, until he finally began to believe them. Maybe he could actually fall asleep. Maybe he could at least try, and maybe for once he wouldn't have dreamed of anything, and maybe he would wake up in the morning still feeling half as well. Maybe if he closed his eyes...

He heard soft footsteps down the hall, but didn't pay much attention, knowing Phil liked to listen sometimes and make sure everything was alright. He was a bit oversensitive on this point, but probably everyone would if they had been awakened by screaming or crying as many times as he had. Somewhere down the hall a door creaked softly, probably from

Tommy's room, and then the two voices whispered a few words, too softly for him to catch any particular words.

"We'll talk about it in the morning. Sleep now," Phil said finally, a little clearer as he closed the door again. "Good night."

The house was once again in a blissful, undisturbed silence. And then, just before Techno actually let his mind drift away, you could hear a quiet and sleepy voice:

"Good night, dad."

In a split second, a dream became the last thing Techno wanted to do. He sprang to his feet, sitting on the bed, waiting for more, but all he could hear in his ears was his own rapid heartbeat and shallow breathing.

Phil didn't answer.

The house remained completely silent.

And then someone descended the stairs, quickly and almost silently, and it was only then that Techno realized that for a long moment he had been gripping his forearm so tightly that his fingers slowly cramped. He tried to loosen his grip, but he had trouble focusing on anything and eventually just leaned in, resting his forehead on his knees. It wasn't really happening, couldn't be really, everything was going so well, everything finally started to fall into place, how could one stupid word destroyed it? How could one word be enough to make whatever he had feared for weeks suddenly become a fact that he could no longer deny and against which he had no way to defend himself?

It should never have happened, Tommy couldn't, had no right...! He was only here for a moment, he knew he was here for a moment, it was never meant to be 'forever'! And now... Now there was no way he would just disappear like that, Techno knew Phil, Phil who cried when Wilbur first called him 'dad', and when they both decided to take his name, and every time they gave him a gift for Father's Day. Phil, who wouldn't have sent him back after the first month even if he had asked for it himself. Phil, who could deny a child absolutely nothing, and certainly not love and care. Phil, who...

Who didn't answer.

Techno forced himself to raise his head, holding his breath, to be able to listen to the sounds of the house, to absolute silence, undisturbed by any sound. Nobody walked down the corridor or opened any doors, nobody came back up the stairs. He swallowed hard as he tried to force his muscles to cooperate, but just getting out from under the covers proved to be a much more difficult task than he had ever imagined. He never wanted to go, he wanted to stay in bed, he wanted to curl up under the covers and tell himself that he had heard nothing, nothing happened, but he was sure that this time he was not the only one who felt overwhelmed and knew he wouldn't forgive himself, if he hadn't checked to see if Phil was okay.

He didn't turn on the light along the way, and he nearly fell down the last three steps, but slowly, supporting himself on the wall, he made his way through the living room and on to the ajar door to the terrace. The cold air hit him in the face, he shuddered, his bare feet instinctively withdrawn from the cool wood, his arms around himself as the first gust of wind disillusioned him with the thickness of his pajamas. The sky was clear, the moon was high, but the city lights were obscured by any stars, and in the dark, almost gray space, there was nothing to look for or to admire.

Phil was leaning against the railing, facing the garden, and although Techno would not have been able to see his face even if they weren't in complete darkness, he could see too well how much his shoulders were shaking, he could hear too clearly the shallow, rapid breathing, he recognized too well the way he leaned forward, tightening his fingers against the wood, burying his head in his arms...

He had one last chance to turn around and run away. He wanted to run away, because of all the things in the world, it was comforting others that he was the worst possible, and he was well aware of it himself. But he also knew that he would never forgive himself if he just went back to bed without even trying to help. Not after all the times he needed support himself, and he always got an abundance of it, no matter what.

He took a step forward, the board creaked under his feet, and Phil flinched as he turned his head.

"Ah." He raised his hand immediately, hastily wiping his eyes. "You're not sleeping yet? You'll be tired in the morning, go back to bed."

He didn't come any closer, nor encourage Techno to do it himself, and even if he had not given a hundred very clear signs so far, this one thing would have been more than enough to disturb anyone who knew him. Because Phil never kept his distance, not on his own initiative and not if he didn't have to.

Techno frowned.

"Everything's all right?" He asked, going further down the terrace, involuntarily cowering in the cold. He hoped his teeth wouldn't start chattering.

Phil still didn't move, his hands gripping the railing tighter.

"Sure," he said in a tone that couldn't convince anyone with a bit of empathy. "I just needed some fresh air." He turned his face towards the garden, staring for a moment at the shapes in the dark as if he could see something more in them, as if he was looking for something. And then he glanced over his shoulder again and blinked as if it surprised him that Techno was still there. Or as if he had already forgotten that he had even appeared. "Why did you go out barefoot? You'll catch a cold."

Techno wasn't sure why that particular sentence made him feel a sudden rush of determination. Maybe because his eyesight was accustomed to the darkness and he could see Phil's face better, maybe because his tone sounded completely different in the silence of the night, maybe because he was also barefoot and didn't seem to notice it. Or maybe it was

simply because there was something endearing and overwhelming about the fact that even at such a moment Phil could think and care for others more than for himself.

Whatever the reason, Techno walked the distance between them without a word in a few steps and pressed tightly against his father's back, hugging him as tightly as he could.

He had never noticed before that he was actually beginning to equal Phil's height lately. If he stood on his tiptoes, he would be able to rest his cheek on his shoulder.

"It's okay," he said as Phil inhaled sharply, then let it out, barely suppressing a sob. "It's okay," he repeated, feeling the flesh in his embrace tremble. "You can cry if you want."

He felt fingers on his forearms pushing them aside, and for a moment he was sure he had said or done something wrong. But then Phil turned and held him tightly against him, hiding face in his hair, and Techno wasn't sure who was holding whom and which one needed it more.

"Sorry..." Phil's voice was weak and brittle with each word, and his shoulders trembled as he put his hand over his mouth to muffle another sob. "I shouldn't-"

Techno shook his head, hugging him even tighter.

"You can cry," he assured, trying to sound as convincing as it did when he heard it himself. "You always tell us it's nothing wrong. And that we can cry whenever we want. You also can."

This time Phil laughed weakly and somewhat hysterically.

"So some of my words *do* stay in your head," he choked.

And then he finally allowed himself to cry.

* * *

Techno wasn't entirely sure how or when he ended up in his own bed. He remembered that his fingers had almost lost the feeling of standing on the cold terrace, and that at one point, when he himself began to tremble, Phil had released him from his embrace and led him inside. He remembered the smell of hot chocolate in two steaming mugs and that one of them had been turning it in his hands for a long time to warm up. He also remembered that neither of them had said a word as they sat side by side on the couch under the blanket, he remembered the silence of the sleeping house and that his own eyelids grew heavier and heavier, until he finally involuntarily rested his head on Phil's shoulder and had to actually fall asleep because when he opened his eyes again he was in his own room, blankets up to the tip of his nose. Moments later, his alarm went off, and somewhere down the hall the bathroom door slammed, announcing that Wilbur had just beaten him in the morning race.

He put off going downstairs for as long as possible, checking three times that he had packed all his books and brushing his hair much more thoroughly than usual. He was still asleep, and thinking was difficult, as if each thought had to wade separately through a very dense fog. In the end, however, he had to accept that he wouldn't be able to postpone the inevitable forever and, throwing his backpack over his shoulder, he descended the stairs, dragging each step as if he were climbing a steep mountain.

Wilbur and Tommy were finishing eating, laughing, bantering and making exactly as much noise as ever, but Techno barely noticed them. His scrambled eggs had cooled down and turned unpleasantly rubbery, but he wasn't sure he could taste it at all. He chewed it completely automatically, his thoughts very far away, in a place where the glimpses of consciousness could barely reach. He was tired, and it had little to do with the fact that it was almost seven in the morning and he fell asleep extremely late. Or even that his throat felt a little scratchy, and he was probably going to have a runny nose today. He wanted to lie down and never get up again, and if he had any more energy left, most likely he would have cried. Because he counted so much on it being over, that he would never feel so empty and indifferent again, that everything would be normal...

He didn't wake up a bit until Phil showed up in the living room with a mug of coffee, and even then he wasn't sure it was a good rush of emotion. He was ashamed even if he had no idea why. He was pretty sure he had acted well yesterday, that he had done what had to be done, but the voices kept whispering that he only made it worse, that he should have left Phil alone, that now it's gonna be strange between them, and that it was all his fault because he couldn't stop and think twice before doing something.

And maybe Phil had somehow heard all these things, or maybe he knew them all too well from his own experience, for when their gazes met, he smiled just like any other day and reached out to ruffle his hair.

"We have to dye it soon," he assessed, running his fingers through the pink wisps, most likely looking for dark roots.

And, in some magical way known only to him, it was enough. The air grew a little lighter, the voices a little quieter, and even though it still wasn't perfect, even if last night's still wasn't just a bad dream, Techno smiled back, letting his hairstyle be completely ruined.

It was easier knowing that Phil was still his Phil. Just as it was much easier to endure each lesson, when Dream would talk to him at each break, and even made Sapnap pretend he wasn't trying to arrange a funeral for him anymore. It was easier to eat when Wilbur waved them from his cafeteria table and shifted to make his brother a seat next to him. It was easier to laugh, easier to breathe, easier not to think, and even though Techno was still more than exhausted by forcing himself into anything more than a passive existence, it was nice to finally have a reason to actually try.

He knew something was wrong as soon as they entered the house. At first glance, everything seemed perfectly normal - Phil was finishing writing a report, occasionally peeking over his laptop to see if Tommy was still watching the movie instead of trying to set fire to the house, and the child himself was staring at the screen with an equally devout, mindless reverence as always. They were both questioned about school and rushed to wash their hands before dinner, but the atmosphere was different than usual. More taut, dense and almost creepy with its artificiality. Techno didn't like when adults pretended anything. He liked it even less when Phil did. And now he was clearly trying to sound and appear as cheerful as possible. Tommy wasn't even half as good an actor, though it must be taken into account that he probably didn't quite understand that he should play anything. He was clearly moody, unresponsive to taunts, and right after lunch, while Wilbur drummed his part of 'slavery' washing dishes, he lay down on the couch without even turning on the TV.

Techno wasn't sure he wanted to be a part of it. But for the moment he couldn't bear the thought of sitting in his own room, all by himself, and Phil had locked himself in his office, saying that he had to finish the work, so whether he wanted it or not, he took the chair and waited patiently for further developments.

He didn't have to wait that long. As soon as Wilbur appeared in the living room, shaking water from his hand, he immediately jumped on the couch, nudging the boy to get his attention.

"What happened?" He asked, and when he got no answer he frowned. "You're sad, I can see it."

Tommy sat up, bringing his knees to his chest, and that was enough for Techno to know that it was not going to be any good. But it wasn't until the boy spoke in a low, slightly trembling voice that he realized it was very, very bad.

"Phil said I shouldn't call him 'dad'."

Techno really should have expected this. He should have foreseen that Phil - Phil who couldn't lie about the stupid goldfish's death, would have to bring up the subject. That he wouldn't be calm until he talked to Tommy honestly and openly about it, because that's what he did every time one of his children did something wrong, more or less intentionally. Techno should have seen this coming. And maybe, deep down, he actually did. But now that he heard it aloud, as he looked at the child and he could almost feel the sadness and regret emanating from him...

Wilbur's eyes widened and for a moment he seemed too surprised to react. But then he straightened up, frowned, and glanced toward the stairs, as if he expected Phil to be here any minute to justify himself.

"And why is that?" He asked when they were still the only people in the living room.

Techno sincerely wanted to kick him. Very, very hard. Because hell, everyone knew 'why', they knew it from the very beginning, and it never changed for a moment. It was stupid, mindless, and cruel to ask, like deliberately scratching a wound only to sprinkle salt on it again.

Tommy curled his shoulders, resting his chin on his knees, starting to twist his fingers.

"Because then it will be hard for me to get used to a new home when Sam takes me," he replied, repeating very clearly what he had heard himself. "And I will miss you all more. But that's okay," he added, suddenly lifting his head and smiling sluggishly. "It was fun having a dad, even for a while. Mom always said I'd never have one because no one would want her because of me."

At times Techno really seriously wondered if there was any limit to the harm Tommy was able to forgive in return for a little attention and affection, or even a vague promise of them. Anything that could make him stop trusting, blindly and for no reason, and forgive without even expecting an apology. At what point was he just going to understand and start treating his own heart with a little more respect and caution? Usually he concluded that probably never. And certainly not now, not in their home.

Because as long as he was part of their family, no matter the reason or the situation, Tommy always had Wilbur - ready to get angry and demand justice on his behalf. Even when he absolutely shouldn't.

Techno has already seen his brother angry. More than once or twice he heard a few unpleasant things from him and repaid the same, he also happened to get hit straight in the nose with a door and he didn't believe that it was always 'accidentally'. But Wilbur was definitely not made for this, and for the most part there was more regret and frustration than real anger. Like when he yelled at Phil for leaving Friend in the garden in the rain. And even if it wasn't quite fair, because he should have remembered it himself, it was hard to blame him when he held the dripping mascot to his chest and cried so hard that at times it sounded like he was about to suffocate.

This time he wasn't crying at all. And he didn't look like he was planning to start, though his eyes sparkled and his mouth tightened into a narrow line. This time, perhaps for the first time since Techno had known him, his anger seemed sincere and undeterred.

"I'll talk to him," he said dryly, protruding abruptly and almost running towards the stairs.

Techno, taken completely by surprise, took a few seconds to understand what had just happened and to jump to his feet as well.

"Wilbur!" He exclaimed, more instinctively than expecting an actual reaction. "Wait."

He only managed to catch up with him halfway down the corridor and immediately grabbed his elbow tightly, holding him in place. He glanced at the office door, but it seemed that Phil was wearing headphones and hadn't heard them yet. Techno was determined to keep it that way.

Wilbur jerked his hand as he tried to pull away, and when that had no effect, he glared at his brother with undisguised irritation.

"What?" He growled, and under any other circumstance Techno would seriously consider surrender. If it were anyone else, he would have let his brother wreak havoc and destruction,

because Christ, Wilbur could be surprisingly scary if he really wanted to, and walking in his way was now like trying to put out a hellfire with a car fire extinguisher.

But he wasn't going to let all that anger focus on Phil, not when he still remembered how he felt trying to console him yesterday, how overwhelmed and scared he was by it, because if even Phil broke, if even he couldn't handle it... how was he supposed to not give up?

"Don't..." He bit his lip as he stepped nervously from foot to foot. "Phil was sad yesterday. Very. Because of Tommy calling him... that." He glanced once more at the still closed door and leaned in, lowering his voice to a whisper. "And he cried."

Wilbur's face softened immediately and he stopped trying to tear his hand away from his grip. He froze for a moment, then his shoulders dropped as if all the anger had drained out of him in a second, leaving him confused and utterly helpless.

"Oh," he just said, wrapping his arms around himself as his wrist finally released. Then, quite suddenly, he frowned and looked up at his brother suspiciously. "How do you know?"

Techno wasn't entirely sure what he was actually being accused of, but he definitely didn't like it.

"I saw." He shrugged, then, after a second of hesitation, added, "And I talked to him a little after that."

He hoped Wilbur wouldn't ask for details because the last thing he wanted to do was 'talk honestly about your feelings'. At the same time, he very much wanted him to ask. Because probably only under pressure and compulsion would he be able to at least partially sort out his own emotions.

But Wilbur just looked at him, his face hardened.

"Of course you did," he said dryly, dodging him and walking back to the stairs. " *Of course* ."

Techno followed, confused and increasingly irritated.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing." He leaned over the railing. "Tommy! Come here! The country will not run itself."

Somewhere downstairs, a pair of feet pounded on the floor, and after a while the boy appeared next to him, his eyes moving between them, smiling a little uncertainly.

"Can Techno play with us?" He asked as he was pulled by the hand towards the room, and Wilbur stopped immediately, his fingers clenched so tightly that the baby winced.

"Techno blew everything up, Tommy," he recalled in a calm, icy voice he had never used before. "He destroyed everything." He turned his head so he could look his brother straight in the eye. "He's a traitor, remember?"

Nobody said anything else anymore. Wilbur pulled Tommy's hand into his room, and it took Techno a moment to realize that he had completely forgotten to breathe. And that he can't walk, because although nothing physically kept him in the corridor, which was quiet and empty, for a long time he was unable to bring himself to even the slightest movement. His head was buzzing, but he was also surprisingly calm, a bit dull and dazed.

He barely registered the next door open and Tommy ran down the hall, burst into his room, and then pounded his feet again on the floor.

"Here!" Somewhat out of breath, he lifted up a white bear, and when there was no reaction, he jumped up, practically stabbing Techno in the chin. Only this made the boy blink, look down and a bit instinctively reach for the mascot. Tommy stepped back as soon as he was sure the stuffed animal wouldn't land on the floor, and rocked on his heels, staring at the floor. "Wilbur told me to give it back" he muttered more to his socks. Then he glanced around surreptitiously, moved closer and, pulling Techno by the sleeve, induced him to lean in. "I told him something nice to tell you if you're sad again," he whispered, and Techno, without thinking and barely understanding what he was hearing, nodded.

"Thank you," he muttered, staring at Steve's white, fluffy face. It was Wilbur who wanted it, practically forcibly dragged Techno to the right aisle in the store and told him to choose.

Techno was sure he had chosen him as his brother in the same way. That he just knew from the first moment they met.

But maybe he was the only one who believed in something that stupid.

Chapter End Notes

Phil - close to breakdown.

Techno - heartbroken.

Wilbur - frustrated af.

Tommy - :D

Yup, as it should be, lmao.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

I worked at this chapter with @Katricia! :D

Somehow, although Techno had expected the imminent end of the world, the following days passed calmly. Maybe sometimes you really need to hit rock bottom first to bounce back. Or maybe the available tragedies just ended and something good had to happen.

Wilbur still didn't want to talk to him. Which, frankly speaking, wasn't as shocking as it was the first time. Painful, yes, but Techno had gotten used to much worse in life than the awkward atmosphere at breakfast and sharing friends according to the complicated but fair 'You can take Dream, the rest is mine.' He started eating dinners in his room, because whenever Wilbur tried to do so, Tommy kept running back and forth up and down the stairs to tell him something super important, and as a result more food ended up on the floor than in his stomach. Techno actually didn't mind. At least he didn't have to pretend to Phil that everything was fine.

Although, to tell you the truth, at times it didn't matter to him. At times he just wanted to cuddle up to his father and tell him everything he had done and how he couldn't bear the consequences, and that he didn't care anymore whether he would be punished for it, as long as it was normal again after. Phil might be angry, and certainly very disappointed, but it still sounded like a better option than the overwhelming feeling that there was no room left for him in his own house. But the shadows under Phil's eyes were stronger than ever, he at times stared out into space with a blank, unseeing gaze, and sometimes, when he was absolutely sure no one was seeing, he stared at Tommy with some strange longing and unspeakable regret. Techno didn't have the heart to worry him any more. He couldn't bear it if he made Phil cry again.

So it remained for him to wait patiently, to wade through each subsequent day, hoping that maybe today Sam will call with good news, and falling asleep to stick to the thought that it will definitely happen tomorrow. It wasn't that hard. Once Techno got the right rhythm, the days passed in no time, and before he knew it, October started, cold, windy and extremely rainy. Tommy began to regularly apply water to the house and use a raincoat to carry the mud to another lopsided structure in the garden, Wilbur played more and more sad songs in the evenings, and the whole house was drowned in chestnut men and leaves painted with colorful paints. Techno quite liked the fall. No one looked askance when he wore long-sleeved sweatshirts, he could splash people with water and insist it was an accident, and if he decided to stand out, all he had to do was slide down the hood and let the pastel pink stand out against the dull reality.

The last one especially always gave him the greatest fun. He liked his hair (no matter how loud he cursed sometimes while brushing it), no matter how strange it might sound, he considered it some kind of evidence that Phil never went back on his word, even if several teachers had complained that neither the color or length were suitable for school. That's why, although he had not had the slightest desire to do anything in any way related to taking care of himself and his appearance recently, on Saturday at eight in the morning he was sitting in the bathroom, mixing pink dye and trying to breathe as close to the ajar door as possible. Usually Phil helped him, but this time the roots were still quite short and he figured he could handle it on his own. And maybe he wanted to avoid the embarrassing silence, or worse - actual conversation.

He was just finishing applying the first coat and checking in the mirror to make sure he hadn't missed any places when he caught a glimpse of a small figure crouched by the doorway, peering uncertainly through the crack. He sighed silently, pondering for a moment whether to just pretend he hadn't seen anything and close the door, even at the expense of fresh air. But it was early, the rest of the family was still asleep, and Tommy could be damn loud when he didn't get what he wanted, so after a long struggle with himself, Techno turned to look at him.

"You can come in," he grunted as the boy, caught peeking, squealed softly and tried to jump away. "Well, I can see you, I'm not blind. You can't sneak."

Tommy immediately forgot about any fear and, opening the door wider, went inside, puffing up his cheeks.

"I can be good at sneaking! If I wanted to... If I wanted to, I would have hid myself so that you wouldn't find me at all."

Techno just rolled his eyes, going back to mixing dye. Tommy followed his every move closely, quickly forgetting that he was supposed to be acting offended and standing on his tiptoes instead to see better.

"Why do you have long hair?" He asked, leaning against the sink to peer into the plastic bowl. He sniffed and instantly grimaced, shielding his face from the strong scent. Techno smiled involuntarily, only a little maliciously.

"Why shouldn't I have? I like it that way." He shrugged, biting the inside of his cheek for a moment and almost squinting to make sure the brush was in the right spot. "And that's my secret message. For my mother."

He had no idea why he added the latter. Maybe he was tired, maybe because he'd been talking mostly to himself lately, and he didn't have to pay attention to his words. Or maybe the dye was a bit more toxic than he expected, and he was inhaling a little too much of it.

Tommy tilted his head back to look at him.

"I thought you didn't know your mom?" He said, surprised, leaning his back against Techno. Techno grimaced, but made no move to push him away. Mainly because he was wearing very dirty gloves.

"Not a real mother. Foster mother," he clarified, and seeing that the child still did not understand (had Sam explained absolutely nothing to him?), he sighed heavily, setting off to search for layers of patience that he never had. "She looked after me once. Like Phil's looking after you, though it's a very bad comparison."

"Oh." Tommy tried to stick his finger into the bowl and hissed when he was slapped in the hand for it. "You didn't like her?"

"No. She was a stupid bi-," he broke off at the last moment, grunting. "She was very mean. Once she cut me almost bald because I didn't want to be dragged to the hairdresser."

He hadn't planned to say that either. But for some reason he couldn't regret not biting his tongue after all. Tommy had never listened to him so carefully and with such attention before. And he rarely actually listened to anyone at all.

"Oh." He seemed genuinely sad, and when he carefully raised his hand to run his fingers over Techno's pink hair, was visibly surprised he was not reprimanded for it. He did it again a little more confidently, and again, and maybe it wasn't half as enjoyable as it was when Phil and Wilbur did it, but for the moment it was perfectly fine. "And that's why you like it long?"

Techno, who had no idea at what point he closed his eyes, the brush still in his hand, looked at him closely, trying to judge if he could afford an honest answer.

"Yes. In case I ever meet her again." He smiled to himself. "I hope she'll have a stroke just from seeing me."

Tommy chuckled, though it was clear he didn't quite understand the joke. Or that it was not exactly a joke.

"I like it too," he said, winding a few strands of hair around his fingers. And then, as usual, when he remembered or thought of something sad, his whole demeanor immediately changed and he hung his head as he shuffled his socks on the floor. Techno wasn't going to ask or persuade him to say what it was about, six years old or not, the kid still had a right to privacy, especially in his own head. But Tommy has always preferred to depend on others more than on himself. "I don't know if I would like my mother to be sad if she ever saw me."

Techno put the brush back in the bowl, but hesitated before taking off his gloves. He wanted an excuse in case the boy suddenly cried and expected more immediate comfort.

"And what do you want?" He asked carefully, hoping it wasn't just sticking the stick in the center of the anthill.

Tommy shrugged, still staring at the floor.

"The most..." he muttered indistinctly. "Most probably I wouldn't like to see her at all. Because if I saw her, then... then I would like to go back to her again. And that wouldn't be good."

His voice cracked slightly and he blinked, clearly holding back tears, but then he took a loud, deep breath and shook his head as if convincing himself that there was no point in despairing and to get a grip.

And maybe it was this, this strangely familiar, too mature for his age trial that made Techno feel like some part of him, even if a small one, finally succumbed and gave up this unequal fight.

"Hey." He leaned in to smoothen their faces together and smiled, lowering his voice to a theatrical whisper. "You wanna be a little rebel and give Phil a heart attack?"

The boy immediately grinned broadly.

"I want!" He assured me so enthusiastically that no one would have been able to avoid laughing at him. Techno, at least, couldn't help it.

"Okay, don't move," he ordered, reaching back for the paint pan. Carefully, he chose a strand of light hair, wide enough to be visible but still narrow enough to be covered with the rest of the fringe in case of problems, and carefully, slowly smeared the dye over it, making sure to keep the brush away from Tommy's eyes. He straightened up, admiring his handiwork, and immediately had to slap Tommy's hands as he instinctively reached for his head. "No, hands off. I don't have a second pair of gloves. Come on," he chuckled as the boy started blowing on his hair. "Come here and see yourself in the mirror. As it dries, it will be much brighter."

Although the pink streak was only visible from one side, the boy turned in front of the mirror anyway, leaning sideways a few times and shaking his head to view it from every possible angle.

"And what now?" He asked, clearly excited, as if he had expected this to be just the beginning of a fascinating adventure. Techno almost felt bad dispelling his dreams. Almost.

"Now we're waiting."

The child immediately stopped bouncing in place and puffed up his cheeks a bit, clearly dissatisfied and ready to complain about the cruelty of the world and the paint producers. But when Techno tossed a few towels on the floor and sat on them, taking care not to accidentally touch the top of his head against the wall, and then patted the seat next to him in a somewhat clumsy invitation, Tommy immediately brightened again and took the opportunity. They had an entire bathroom at their disposal, and there was no reason for him to practically cling to the older boy's side, but neither of them said anything about it.

There was something extremely strange about the silence between them for the next few minutes. Maybe because Tommy had rarely been able to stay still longer than two minutes without pouring his thoughts out into the world. Or maybe simply because Techno has never felt so calm and comfortable with a child. And even if there was probably more fatigue in it than actual goodwill, he couldn't help but think it wasn't all that bad, having the Gremlin at his side.

As expected, the boy didn't manage to stay calm for a long time.

"You had an argument with Wilbur?" He asked, looking up. He seemed genuinely worried and looked at him the same way he had the days before when he was handing Steve back to him.

Techno closed his eyes for a moment, winding strands of hair around his fingers. He wondered how long exactly it had been since his brother had last braided them.

"No," he sighed finally, feeling the baby's gaze slowly burn a hole in his skull. "Not really. We just don't talk to each other."

Tommy frowned, tilting his head.

"Why?" He asked, because of course he could never settle for a simple answer. He was pretty damn like Phil in that, though thank God he hadn't read any wise books and guides yet.

Techno quietly hoped that Tommy's next house wouldn't follow the 'speak when spoken to' rule. Regardless of everything, Tommy didn't deserve to smother all of his childhood curiosity so quickly.

"I don't know..." He shrugged, and, this time, it was the honest truth, not just an excuse to cut the topic short. He had no idea what he had done wrong. Okay, maybe not really. He had no idea what, in the long list of mistakes, was bad enough to scrap the last two years and make Wilbur hate being in the same room with him.

Tommy didn't seem to be even close to the drama of the situation and the understanding of its inner tear.

"Well, if you don't know, why not ask him?" he prompted, as if there was nothing simpler in the world. "You'll know what to apologize for."

Techno bristled immediately, because okay, maybe he broke something (he definitely broke something, like an arm...), but Wilbur wasn't much better, with his insults and malicious remarks and stupid 'canonical' games.

"Why should I apologize first?" He huffed, crossing his arms over his chest.

Tommy just looked at him in surprise.

"Because then he will also apologize and you two can make up" said with all the calm and life wisdom of a six-year-old, and Techno suddenly felt bloody childish.

Because maybe, in fact, he was a little childish, even if he liked to say otherwise. Maybe all of being an adult was about more than not running around the store and pretending that he didn't want to join in on hammering the toothpicks into the chestnuts. Maybe that's what Phil meant when he said that he couldn't be a child for a long time - that now he didn't quite know what to do with himself when he was suddenly going to stop being one.

He winced as he wound more strands around his fingers, pulling a little harder than he should have.

"I don't know if it works like that."

Tommy nodded eagerly, shifting to sit across from him, hands on his knees.

"It works, it works," he assured. "I was angry with Tubbo, but he apologized and he was sad, so I also apologized so that he wouldn't cry anymore. And it worked!"

He spread his arms as if he was presenting a real miracle to his one-man audience, and Techno found himself actually smiling.

"What did the great Tubbo do that offended you so much?" He asked a little bitterly. "Didn't want to teach you how to walk on water?"

Tommy must have picked up the mockery in his tone as he grimaced and stuck his tongue out at him. But then he grew a bit serious, pulling his hands back to begin pulling the pajama sleeves over his hands.

"He told his parents," he muttered and took a deep breath. "About- About my mom. And that she's still gone and that I was alone again. He promised not to tell anyone! But he did, and then suddenly a lot of people came and they all asked a lot of questions and looked at me strangely." He winced at the mere memory, pulling his knees higher under his chin. "And it wasn't cool at all."

Techno opened his mouth to say something wise and fact-changing, but then shut it, deciding he didn't know anything like that.

A long time ago, so long ago that he hoped to forget it someday, he had endured months in the worst place he could imagine. It was his fifth home and he really believed that he would be his last, that one day he just wouldn't wake up, that he would eventually do something so bad (steal food from the fridge, not come back from school in time, touch something he should never have touched) that he won't be able to get up, dress the wounds and curl up in bed waiting for the pain to end. Sometimes he wondered how quickly anyone would realize something was wrong and if they would try to save him at all. He doubted it very seriously.

And then, quite suddenly, one of his 'brothers' decided to tell someone about everything and the police appeared at the house, each with a million questions, and Nate looked as if he himself was close to death. Techno didn't feel sorry for him at all. Just as he was never grateful to his 'brother' who was just trying to save his own skin by blaming everyone around him. But, regardless of his intentions, he accidentally did something good.

Tubbo probably wanted to do good right from the start. He probably didn't understand the consequences of being involved with adults and only wanted somebody's support. He was just a kid, and he did the first thing that crossed his mind when he saw his friend getting hurt. Techno hated snitches. But he knew that sometimes you just cared too much for someone not to react, even against their will.

He exhaled slowly, searching for the right words again.

"It probably wasn't cool," he admitted, unconsciously leaning slightly towards Tommy. "But I think he wanted to help."

Tommy nodded slowly.

"I know. That's why I apologized for yelling at him," he admitted, a bit embarrassed. And then, since he was a stubborn little gremlin, he added, "So you'll ask Wilbur?"

Techno grimaced.

"I'll think about it," he muttered, knowing full well that it was much easier said than done. But Tommy grinned, and somehow, for some reason, it actually cheered him up.

* * *

Phil didn't have a heart attack. Though for a second he seemed close to it. When he came down to the living room almost an hour later, still in his bathrobe and a bit sleepy, Tommy - his hair washed and dried, neatly combed to make the pink strand stick out as much as possible - immediately jumped off the couch and ran to almost knock him off his feet by jumping on him with all his might and hugging him tightly around the waist. Phil yawned widely, ruffling his hair involuntarily, then glanced down, froze for a moment, ran his fingers over the pink strands, and closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath.

"I haven't even had my coffee yet," he said, sounding as if he were more sorry that they hadn't given him even this brief moment of blissful peace than about the hair itself.

Techno, leaning over the back of the couch, smiled slightly.

"Now you don't have to," he said innocently, while Tommy was already starting to turn in all directions, so that no one would miss how much he had changed since yesterday evening.

Phil, indeed, didn't have any coffee. He decided that tea would do his heart a much greater favor. And it actually worked, because already a quarter of an hour later, repeatedly running his fingers through the child's hair, he seemed as excited as the boy himself. Though he probably enjoyed his joy more than the vision of a teacher's note that Tommy would no doubt be bringing back from school soon.

"It's pretty cute," he said, then laughed as Tommy started the whole monologue about how he's absolutely not cute because he's too big for that.

Techno rolled his eyes, then quickly looked away as Phil looked directly at him. His gaze was a kind of affection and pride, which he absolutely did not deserve and which he should probably feel bad about, because how low did he have to fall to make being nice to a six-

year-old something special? But somehow he couldn't bring himself not to cling to the one thought that maybe he had finally done something right.

Wilbur's reaction was much more vivid than that of Phil. Maybe because he didn't usually need coffee to act as if he had pure caffeine in his veins.

"What have you done?!" It was the first thing he asked when he saw Tommy, and he immediately grabbed his cheeks, turning his head in all directions as if trying to quickly assess the damage. He seemed so panicked that even Phil frowned and leaned out in his chair to peer into the living room through the open kitchen door.

Tommy, clearly unhappy that his new look hadn't met the anticipated delight, puffed his cheeks and brushed his hands away, gasping indignantly.

"Techno dyed me." He raised his head proudly. "And Phil likes it and says it's very nice!" He added, and the mute 'why aren't you also delighted?' sounded too blunt.

Wilbur slowly lowered his hands, his shoulders relaxed and his face softening.

"Techno let you?" He asked incredulously and looked towards the kitchen. As soon as his eyes met his brother's, he blushed as he looked away. "Oh. That's- That's good. Because I thought..." He pursed his lips and shook his head. "Doesn't matter."

In Techno's modest and absolutely uninteresting opinion - it did matter. But he didn't try to ask, partly so as not to spoil the recently rare pleasant atmosphere, partly because even if he wanted to, he would have to shout over Tommy's cheerful chatter first.

He couldn't remember the last time the four of them had eaten any meal, especially saturday breakfast, together. He remembered even less how much time had passed since that one day, that one hour, belonged only to him and Phil. And maybe if he had been a bit less resigned, he would still have regret about it, for that small part of the routine that might seem trivial from the outside, but gave him peace and some unspoken guarantee. Because Phil, who on saturday was glancing at him over his shoulder and laughing that he should drink coffee and not stare at the cup, was the same Phil who came at night to remind him that he was safe, who hugged him when he cried who didn't raise his voice even when Techno yelled at him for no reason.

Deep down in his heart, Techno knew he was still entitled to each of these things. But sometimes, at night, when he woke up from another nightmare, he thought about how easily he had lost one of those things - and he was afraid the others would disappear before he even knew it.

But for now, he just wanted peace and quiet and a bit of normalcy, and sitting at the table with the whole family was the closest alternative he could have asked for, so he allowed himself to just enjoy it.

"And Techno promised that someday he would dye all my hair!" Tommy informed, taking the scrambled eggs on his plate very patiently. "And I'll be as pink as he is!"

Techno looked up from his plate, meeting Phil's slightly terrified gaze.

"No, I didn't say that," he said quickly.

Tommy straightened, puffing his cheeks.

"You did!"

"I literally never said that."

"But you thought so!" He insisted, putting his hands on the table and almost standing in the chair. "Loud! I heard!"

Somewhere nearby, Wilbur snorted a brief laugh and Techno instinctively glanced at him. Their eyes met for a moment, and even if they both turned their heads right away, this time it was much less embarrassing, more insecure than resentful.

He felt himself smiling a little, raising his eyebrows high and looking down at Tommy.

"Absolutely not," he snorted, and he could almost hear the squeak and scream and the very long grumble, saw Tommy gasp to call him stupid.

Phil stopped the impending avalanche at the last moment, leaning over the table to ruffle the boy's hair, gently pushing him back into the chair.

"Pink really suits you," he assessed, which probably meant that he was mentally prepared for another battle with teachers and school rules.

Tommy immediately forgot that he was planning to get angry about something.

"I know!" He beamed as he lifted his chin high. "It's our family color."

Phil's hand froze for a second, then slowly slid lower, cupping the boy's cheek. His smile was genuine, but there was no trace of amusement in his eyes, just some strange, vague longing, the same with which he sometimes looked at his sons when he said he missed them, even though they were there all the time.

"Our family color," he repeated, and Techno was unable to judge whether he was trying to confirm or deny it.

He probably didn't know himself.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Here! Take this fluff! I'm not saying it's one of the last ones, but... No, that's exactly what I'm saying, lmao.

I worked at this chapter with @Katricia! :D

Over the course of the following week, Techno had a one-of-a-kind opportunity to see how Tommy felt the friendship process worked. More specifically, he quickly realized that for a child, a truce meant an immediate transition to best-mate status, without any intermediate steps. Which, if you thought about it for a moment, shouldn't come as a surprise. What was surprising is that Techno somehow didn't mind this new relationship status. Was Tommy still annoying as he jogged around the house after him, telling the fascinating story of how Ranboo had forgotten again where their classroom was? Yes, definitely. Especially since the story could be summed up in two sentences, and the boy miraculously stretched it to the length of a short novella. But there was something nice about the way Tommy smiled broadly at the sight of him now, how happy he seemed whenever Techno actually paid attention to him and listened to his chatter, sometimes interjecting his comments. And maybe it was a matter of desperation more than goodwill, but after weeks of loneliness, it was damn good to know again that someone really wanted to spend time with him.

Even if Tommy usually chose the wrong time for it.

"Teechnooo..." He heard right above his ear and hunched a little more over his book, pretending to be deaf. He earned a finger stab on the cheek for this. "Come ooon...! Play with me!"

A small hand approached his face a second time, but this time he closed the book in time and gently slapped the child on the fingers with it. Though it was met with a screeching sound as if he had, at least, chopped it off.

"I'm busy," he grunted, trying to read the book again, although he knew perfectly well that there was no chance for even a little peace of mind. "Go torment Wilbur."

Tommy puffed his cheeks as he slammed his back against the backrest and crossed his arms.

"Wilbur's on the phone. With Schlatt. And he told me to get out," he complained, as if he had experienced the highest form of betrayal and abandonment. Techno might even have felt a bit of a pity if he hadn't found out more than once that talking to anyone in front of Tommy was actually shouting over his attempts to focus all his attention on himself. Exactly two days earlier, he had seen Phil playing hide and seek with him and for a very long time not noticing

kid's feet sticking out from under the curtain, because it was the only way to gain a moment to call Bad in peace.

He had no intention of sharing this fate.

"I'm busy," he repeated, because it was always necessary to draw boundaries from the beginning and then defend them fiercely. If you give up once - you have lost. "Take care of yourself, I don't know, count to a thousand, or something..."

He went back to reading, taking great care not to even glance at the child, but he barely had time to run a few lines with his eyes, heard a loud slurp of his nose. And then the second. For the third, joined by a very dramatic, weepy breath in, he finally gave up and turned his head.

"Hey." He put the book down, surprised at how glassy the boy's eyes had become. "Hey, come on now... Don't whine here."

Tommy sniffed again, his chin trembling.

"Nobody ever wants to play with me," he complained, which was absolutely bullshit, but in such a teary tone, it somehow managed to find its way straight to a vulnerable spot in the heart of Techno. The one he didn't usually use and didn't confess to. "And I always only annoy everyone..."

He pulled knees up a little higher under his chin, and Techno felt the panic slowly getting over his senses within him.

"No, not always-" he tried, but it had a completely opposite effect and the boy cringed even more. "Well, but... God, come on! You can sit with me as much as you want. But stop all that whining bullshit," he added.

As it turned out, completely unnecessary, because Tommy immediately beamed, turning to face him and sitting cross-legged, twitching slightly with excitement. There was not even a trace of sadness left, and only the gleam in his eyes as he hurriedly rubbed them with his sleeve made it clear that he knew exactly what he had just done.

Techno gasped with indignation.

"You little shit!" He swung the book, but the boy ducked in time. "You spend too much time with Wilbur, he's been a bad influence on you."

Tommy just grinned even wider, shifting so that he could press his side against Techno's shoulder.

"Read to me!" He demanded, and Techno froze, arm raised to push him away and mouth open to tell him to piss off.

"You want me to read to you?" He asked, a bit idiotically, but was it really his fault that he heard something like that way too rarely? "You mean... a book?" He waited a moment for a positive (and very vivid) answer before he slowly lowered his hand and relaxed his shoulders. "Really?"

The boy nodded again, almost jumping up and down.

"Yes. I like when Phil reads to me. And I asked Wilbur, but he never wants to and says it's boring."

Techno winced involuntarily.

"Wilbur is awfully stupid sometimes," he muttered under his breath, but his irritation passed quickly as he slowly, almost solemnly unfolded the book on his lap. "Might be a little hard for you," he said from above. "But if you don't understand, then tell me and I'll explain it to you."

He would be lying if he said he didn't like it. That Tommy was actually listening intently, nibbling at the sleeve of his sweatshirt, cheek resting on his shoulder. Every now and then he wrinkled his nose and asked for a word he didn't know, and when they got to the end of the chapter he immediately asked for "one more, last one, Techno, come on, please...!" and he whined until the older boy agreed, pretending to be doing it with great mercy, and that he wasn't just as eager and drawn to history at all. He couldn't remember the last time anyone, except maybe Phil, had shared a hobby with him, so even if it was perhaps a slightly exaggerated reaction when he carefully selected and put aside two more books that evening, no one had the right to know.

One of the things Techno couldn't get used to was Tommy's sometimes annoying need for physical contact. Once the boy had clung to his victim, there was no chance of him getting rid of him for the rest of the day. And it wasn't just all the times he'd cuddled up to Phil or jumped on Wilbur's back while they were sitting on the couch, but also much smaller, inconspicuous gestures. The fact that he liked to play with the hood string of Techno's sweatshirt or to tug its sleeve between his fingers, that he rested his cheek on his shoulder, that he would nudge their feet again and again during dinner, as if making sure he was still where he was supposed to be. That sometimes he didn't seem to notice himself when he grabbed someone's hand and then looked down at his own hand, genuinely surprised.

Techno tried very hard not to show how Tommy irritated him at times with all these things. Mainly because he was most angry with himself, for the fact that even in such innocent gestures his instincts perceive the form of an attack. As if a six-year-old thirsty for closeness actually posed any threat and could do him real harm.

Like when they were sitting next to each other at the desk, Tommy struggling with his homework, Techno making sure that he actually solved all the tasks, and being in his thoughts very, very far, he suddenly felt someone touch his hair. He shuddered as he pulled away so violently that he dropped the pencil case off the counter, scattering the crayons across the floor, and the child, equally frightened by his reaction, immediately withdrew his hand, pressing it tightly against his chest.

"Sorry!" He squeaked, curling his arms as he looked down at him with mounting panic. "I just wanted... Because it's so pretty!"

Techno took a deep breath, held the air in his lungs and let it out slowly, mentally counting as Phil had taught him. The effect was never stunning, but it certainly helped a little.

"It's okay," he muttered, leaning in to pick up the scattered items on the floor and not accidentally step on one. "You just surprised me, it's okay. But don't do more like that, okay? I don't like-" He hesitated, a little unconsciously tossing his hair over his shoulder, as far away from the kid as possible. "I don't like being touched without asking."

Tommy, reassured by the fact that no one started shouting at him (Techno wasn't at all concerned with the fact that he was the only one from whom the kid was still expecting such a reaction, he had no remorse, not at all), tilted his head, staring at him carefully.

"Why?"

Techno ran his fingers through his hair, mostly to keep his hands busy.

"Why don't you like it when someone locks you up somewhere?" He asked dryly, without much thought. Which, in the broader sense, might not have been the best idea, since recalling someone else's trauma, especially to compare it with your own, was usually not particularly wise, and Phil always advised them to be a little more careful about it.

But apparently Tommy, like Wilbur, didn't immediately assume there was any evil intention behind it, for he merely frowned in surprise.

"Because-!" He began, but he paused, blinked and suddenly looked at Techno in a completely different way, with a mixture of compassion and understanding. "Oh. Okay." He lowered his hands to his knees and stared at them for a moment, deeply thinking. "But you know... You would never lock me up anywhere, so..." He rocked in his chair, a bit embarrassed. "So I'll be very careful too."

Techno wasn't so sure at all. Not the second part, unfortunately, he could bet on that. From the start, Tommy was ten times better than he was ever meant to be. But even with all the bitterness, he still smiled slightly, relaxing his shoulders and letting his hair fall back onto his back.

"Okay." He nodded, putting down the pencil case, which he had been unknowingly twisting in his hands for several minutes. "I'll remember."

And if he dictated Tommy's answers to a few tasks so they could finally go downstairs and watch a movie, Phil didn't need to know. Although he must have guessed something, because when he stood at the door of Techno's room that same evening, although clearly tired and with dark circles under his eyes, he looked happier than he had been in a long time.

"Tommy's asking you to read to him," he said, raising an eyebrow and smiling as if he knew much more than he should. "He says I'm doing it wrong."

Techno, detached from a math task that he hadn't forgotten at all and hadn't looked at without much effect for up to five minutes, blinked, turned in his chair, and just sat stiffly for a few seconds before finally recovering from the first shock.

"Me?" He made sure, pointing his finger at his chest to be sure. Phil laughed and nodded. "Oh. It's... Okay. I guess... I guess I can, if that's what he wants..."

He tried very hard to pretend to be completely indifferent, but he couldn't help it if as he walked down the corridor he sped up his pace a bit, the corners of his mouth lifted up on his own. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Wilbur leaning out from behind his own room, and smiled at him uncertainly, but his brother only frowned and shut the door immediately. He obviously wasn't in the best of humor. Unlike Tommy, who was bouncing on the bed, apparently trying to break it a second time and break some record. At the sight of the older boy, he lunged forward with a flourish and hurriedly pulled the covers down, reaching under the pillow.

"This one!" He asked, holding a colored book out towards him. Techno looked at her closely and grimaced slightly, but decided to keep the comment to himself. It wasn't the child's fault that no one had developed a good taste for him yet.

Tommy moved closer to the wall, giving him more space, but Techno, after a moment's thought, threw one of the spare cushions to the floor and sat on it, leaning his back against the mattress. He pretended not to see the boy's disappointed expression - if he wanted someone to fawn to, he should choose Phil.

"One chapter," he pointed out in advance, flipping through the book for a bookmark. "I have my own things to take care of."

He had absolutely nothing else to do other than staring at the ceiling, and he eventually made it almost to the end of chapter four before Tommy finally fell asleep, with the duvet tucked into the legs of the bed, his hand stretched out the length of the bed, and his fingers clasped around the sleeve of Techno's pajamas. When he was silent, he seemed much younger than usual, smaller and almost vulnerable, in a way every child should be entitled to. Techno couldn't remember ever feeling this way himself, even with Phil, with his calm aura and safety guarantee, with his kind words and the thought that he finally has a place he can honestly call home. Maybe that's why he couldn't tear his eyes from the tiny hand gripping his T-shirt for a long while, maybe that's why he felt so weird knowing that Tommy, apparently, saw him as one of the reasons he could sleep well. And maybe in some ways he was as proud of it as Phil, standing in the doorway watching them with a warm, tender smile.

Maybe that was why it was getting harder and harder for him to wait for Sam's call.

And maybe that's why it scared him so much when he stopped waiting for it.

Sometimes playing with Tommy turned out to be quite enjoyable and surprisingly entertaining. Like when he really wanted to plant "something of his own" in the garden, but because the coming winter was moderately unfavorable for it, he agreed to compromise and limit it to a house plant. Techno helped him dig through the garage in search of the perfect pot and gave him step-by-step instructions on how to dig and water a ficus seedling. He later caught the boy singing to the plant, probably to make it grow faster, but despite his first instinct, he found it a bit too cute to make a joke and tease about it.

Unfortunately, most of the games were much more destructive, even if at first glance it seemed that nothing could go wrong.

"I'll never give you paint again," Techno grunted, scrubbing his hands with the green color he'd covered them all with, because he was stupid enough to believe the paint would wash off without a problem. It didn't wash off.

The only consolation for him was that Tommy had a mix of blue and red smudged all over his face.

"Phil will murder us," he sighed heavily, rolling up his sleeves so he could lean against the sink a little more comfortably, brushing his fingers harder. His skin was slowly piercing beneath the green, and he felt at least some of the weight drop from his heart. "It's the last time I let you talk me into something so stupid. Now, take the second brush and start scrubbing, then I'll help you. And I don't care if it hurts, you hear me?"

There was no confirmation, so he turned his head, looking expectant, but the boy didn't even notice it, busy staring at his hand with wide eyes. Techno instinctively glanced down, and although he knew exactly what was going on, he felt his throat tighten anyway as he realized that for the first time he had exposed his forearms and the heavy, ugly secret they were hiding.

He wanted to pull his sweatshirt down to his toes immediately, but that would only make the situation even more awkward and tense, so he just cleared his throat aloud as he resumed scrubbing.

"You know it's not good to stare?" He grunted, trying to sound as indifferent as possible, though his hands were starting to tremble and his voice cracked a little.

Tommy nearly jumped out of a trance and blushed.

"I'm not staring at all!" He looked indignant, puffing his cheeks, but his eyes continued to dart to the sink as if drawn by an invisible force. Techno liked to call this force 'curiosity that can kill more than a cat.' "I'm not staring! Why would I do that, you're too ugly to-!" He paused in mid-sentence, his eyes widening even more as he realized what he had said.

Techno noticed with some surprise that not only did it not offend him at all, but he was actually having a good time.

"Come on," he encouraged, keeping his face serious. "Finish."

The boy opened his mouth, moved it several times, then put his hands over it and shook his head quickly. He looked so scared Techno seemed to be unable to torture him anymore, so while watching him learn a lesson for his complete inability to keep his mouth shut was damn gratifying, Techno decided to leave him alone.

"Think sometimes before you say something," he advised, smiling wryly, and as the child continued to stare at him uncertainly, he splashed water over him with a wave of hand, getting a long squeak in response. He leaned a little more over the sink, making sure that his left hand had regained its relatively normal color, but he could still feel the boy's gaze on him, so after a while he sighed heavily, giving up. "You can ask Phil about it," he muttered, glaring at the boy. "If you say I'm sending you, he'll explain everything to you. I... I don't like to talk about it."

Tommy nodded, clearly relaxing a little. Which, in his case, meant that at any moment he would forget all conclusions and start chattering again. In fact, it took less than half a minute for him to come a little closer and lean over the sink, resting his chin on it.

"Did it hurt a lot?" He asked, looking at the scars with such an expression as if he wanted to look away and look at them for hours at the same time. Techno was used to that, and in fact he preferred this mixture of fear and curiosity to outright disgust. But it was still by far the last reason he ever wanted to be in the center of anyone's interest.

"What do you think?" He grimaced as his fingers tightened on the brush.

Tommy didn't answer. He was just silent for a moment, which was surprising in itself, and then he suddenly turned and ran out of the bathroom, leaving Techno alone, with the unpleasant thought that he must have scared the child a little too much when he wasn't trying to do it at all. But shortly thereafter, footsteps echoed in the hallway again, and the boy burst into the bathroom, carrying something in a rolled-up T-shirt that he then tossed into the sink in one fluid movement.

"Hey!" Techno jumped back like it burned him, although the ice cubes, in fact, had the opposite effect. "What are you...?"

Tommy, gasping for breath after the run, tried to say something, but didn't succeed until the third time.

"Because Tubbo's mom always gave us ice when something hurt," he explained, glancing meaningfully at the sink, then at the hands of the older boy. "So I brought some for you, too!"

Techno didn't understand at first. And a hundred times more he would have liked it to stay that way, because he didn't like that strange emotion that filled him for the second before he crushed it with the last of his strength. Or at least he tried.

"Well, it doesn't hurt *now* ," he snorted, rolling his eyes.

Tommy inhaled sharply.

"It worked," he whispered dramatically, leaning over the sink as if he were communing with a powerful magic potion.

Techno couldn't resist the temptation, grabbed one of the ice cubes and threw it behind the collar on his back with one move.

"Stop making things up and stand still so I can wash you," he ordered, shouting over the wild squeak. "And if I peel your skin off in the process, remember it's your own fault."

Tommy, of course, absolutely disagreed with this claim and shouted as loud as if he had actually been murdered, so it was not surprising that Phil burst into the bathroom after a while, probably expecting a horror scene. Instead, he was nearly knocked off his feet by a paint-smeared gremlin insisting that everyone is terrible to him and that being clean is stupid and unnecessary.

"Catch." Techno threw another piece of ice at him. Tommy glared at it before hiding his face in Phil's shirt again. "Your magical artifact."

Phil looked at one boy, then the other, and seemed to think he preferred not to ask.

"We'll try olive oil," he just said in the tone of a man who has survived far too much and nothing can surprise him. And it might actually have translated into wisdom, because whatever he used worked and there was no face transplant, which Techno mentioned only once and he couldn't have foreseen that the child would take it seriously and go hysterical. Anyway, an hour later Tommy was completely clean, but still grumpy and offended at the world. Probably partly because all his paints were temporarily confiscated, partly because no one appreciated his work of art and his attempts to turn into an alien monster.

"Are you planning to sit like this all day?" Techno asked him some time later, sticking his head into the room through the always ajar door. From somewhere in the bundle of blankets and pillows, he heard a low grunt of discontent that he took as an invitation. "Stop pouting and go play with Wilbur."

He sat up in bed, and Tommy immediately turned to face him, sticking his head out over the blanket.

"Wilbur's mad at me," he muttered, nibbling his fingers at his sleeve.

Techno raised his eyebrows. For all possible reasons, this was the least he expected.

"Oh. Why?"

He moved a little closer, mostly to have more room and be able to pull his legs up onto the mattress, but Tommy must have interpreted that as an invitation, as he immediately dug out from under the blanket and pressed against his side, tucking his head under his arm and clinging to it, so that, whether he likes it or not, Techno suddenly found himself in the middle of a strange embrace.

"I don't know," the boy muttered, ignoring his discomfort. "We had fun and everything, but then I asked if you could play with us because you've been in a good mood lately, so maybe you'd like to. And Wilbur was offended and said that I'm stupid and if I didn't like something, I should go and that that's why I would never be a president." He sniffed sadly and then wiped it on the blanket. "And I wanted to be a president. And now I don't even have a place to go..."

Techno blinked, surprised both by the story as such and by each of its elements individually. Of course he had noticed Wilbur had been acting a bit strange lately, it would have been hard not to notice, but he was sure that Wilbur was only doing it in front of him and only to remind him how angry Wilbur was with him. He hadn't considered that it could be anything more, something more serious, and now he felt so damn stupid about it. The world didn't revolve around him, and his brother could have a million problems not related in any way to whether or not they were in an argument. He had school and guitar lessons and friends with whom he disagreed at times, and lots and lots of bad memories that sometimes came back without any reason or warning.

Only at times like this, Wilbur usually remembered that he could ask for help. Of the two of them, he was the one to admit that he had a problem with something and he couldn't cope, he always confided in Phil, while Techno choked everything up for as long as possible before finally giving up and accepting his failure. But the more Techno thought about it, the more he came to the conclusion that Wilbur had been avoiding their father as well. Not in a very obvious way, but the small, inconspicuous gestures still betrayed him. The way he pulled away when Phil wanted to ruffle his hair, how he sat as far as possible on the couch, how he stopped summarizing his entire day at dinner, instead confining himself to a shrug and a short 'It was cool.' That he would sometimes look at Phil as if he was angry at Phil trying to talk to him and for finally giving up after several unsuccessful attempts, at the same time.

He frowned, instinctively drawing the child closer in a defensive gesture. He quickly regretted it and immediately withdrew his arm, but Tommy still looked up at him with big eyes full of undisguised hope.

"You know..." He cleared his throat, stepping back a little just to make sure he wouldn't do something stupid again. "Sometimes I don't get what Wilbur means either. He can be very weird if he wants to."

Tommy nodded vigorously.

"Very weird."

"Yhm. And sometimes he gets offended for just any reason. He's a big drama queen." He smiled crookedly. "But he usually gets over it quickly."

The boy didn't look anyhow convinced or relieved.

"He's been angry with you for a long time," he observed, which was as true as it was painful, and they could all do without him.

"Yes, but... But that's different. It's a little more complicated. But he won't be angry with you for long," he assured, shrugging his shoulders.

The boy's shoulders relaxed a bit, and he suddenly seemed much calmer. As if the words of Techno really mattered to him. As if there were any guarantees and something he could safely believe in.

"You think so?"

Techno wasn't sure he wanted to take on this responsibility. He knew perfectly well, however, that at the moment he had no other option.

"I think so," he nodded, then hesitated, analyzing the pros and cons in his head. "As for this country of yours... I will not make you president," reserved in advance. "Not anything important. But if you really want to, I think I can find some space for you in my country. My and Phil's, I mean."

He expected at least a minimum hesitation, or a statement that it wasn't the same, but Tommy just inhaled loudly and jumped up on the bed.

"Really?" He squeaked excitedly, grabbing his arm tightly again and smiling so broadly that Techno had no heart to withdraw his hand.

"Yhm. Just maybe you better not tell Wilbur, okay?"

"I won't say! I can keep a secret. I never tell anyone anything. Except Tubbo."

Techno rolled his eyes.

"Of course except Tubbo," he snorted. "Okay, hold on." He walked over to the desk, looking for some reasonably blank sheet of paper, which he had rolled up to form a very makeshift sword. He turned, straightened, and very solemnly touched the end of it to first one, then the other, of Tommy's shoulders. "Tommy, you are officially a member of the Antarctic Empire from now on," he announced, and the boy's eyes widened and flashed. "We'll look after you and protect you, unless you get too annoying, then we'll tie you somewhere to a tree for hours or days..."

Tommy puffed up his cheeks.

"Hey!"

Techno couldn't help but tap him on the head with the 'sword'.

"Just kidding, don't squeal at me. Imperial Knights are brave and don't whine for just any reason."

The baby sat up proudly, sticking out its chest.

"I am the bravest knight! And the strongest and the smartest too!"

"Yhm. Well, how could I doubt that..."

When they ran down the stairs some time later for dinner, they were both hot and sweaty, dressed in cardboard armor, with swords tucked in the straps of their trousers. Techno no longer remembered the last time he was actually so hungry and emptied his plate even faster than a child, but he was convinced that a few hours of jumping around the room, plotting conspiracies and feigning fights to the death just could do that.

"And we have a cavern full of skulls!" Tommy reported in the breaks between bites and bites of the sandwich, at times forgetting to swallow first. Like he forgot that secrets work much better when they stay secrets. "And we will terrorize everyone, but just a little, not too much. That they would be afraid of us, but still like us!"

Phil, listening to the chatter with a broad smile, nodded his head to indicate that of course it made a lot of sense and was perfectly logical. Wilbur, by contrast, kept staring stubbornly at his own plate the whole time and only frowned, making an increasingly displeased face.

"What's with your hair?" He fired suddenly, lifting his head and staring straight at his brother so defiantly that Techno instinctively reached back with his hand to make sure he hadn't accidentally lost his hair in the last few minutes.

"I braided it!" Tommy interjected, apparently not feeling how tense the atmosphere had suddenly become. Or maybe he was just too proud of his work and had to show himself no matter what.

Techno rolled his eyes.

"'Braided' is a bit too strong a term," he snorted, because in fact, a lopsided braid took three tries to get up at all, and it only held on due to magic and the power of a child's dream. But although it would take no more than ten seconds to fix it, somehow he couldn't bring himself to do it. Not when he still remembered how wide the boy was grinning as he combed his hair and tried to divide it into three fairly equal parts. How cautiously his fingers moved, slowly, with a patience unbelievable. As if he was trying to prove something and show that he deserves trust.

Techno knew how to appreciate his efforts. And he was damned surprised to see that his brother, apparently, couldn't.

"Why?" Wilbur asked, turning to Tommy as if he were demanding an excuse for the ultimate betrayal.

The boy hesitated, his shoulders curling a little.

"Because he let me?" He replied hesitantly, glancing at Phil for help, but he looked just as confused and helpless. Even so, under the strong pressure of a child's gaze, he forced a smile and leaned back in his chair to ruffle his younger son's dark hair.

"Hey, Wilbur, come on. Are you jealous?" He laughed, raising an eyebrow slightly. The atmosphere grew even tougher if possible. "I'm absolutely sure that there's enough of

Techno's hair for everyone."

Wilbur sucked in a breath, his chin trembled, and for a moment Techno was sure he was about to scream, or at least say some very nasty things. But instead he knocked Phil's hand away from his head and pushed the chair back so violently that it swayed dangerously.

"I'm done," he grunted, almost running towards the stairs, stamping as loudly as if he wanted to make sure everyone would hear for sure.

Phil, frozen for a moment, slowly lowered his hand.

"I said something wrong, didn't I?" he asked so helplessly that although Techno wanted to be at least a little angry with him, because he was an adult here and he should understand and he should always know what to do, somehow he couldn't summon a little anger.

Instead, he stayed a little longer downstairs to help pick up the dishes when Tommy ran upstairs to stuff all the toys in the closet and pretend he had tidied up his room.

"Phil?" He asked as soon as he was sure that it was loud enough upstairs and that the child was definitely busy with his own affairs. There was no answer, so he cleared his throat loudly, and this time Phil almost dropped his glasses, out of his thoughts.

"Hm?" He blinked, looking at his son with a slightly unconscious gaze. "Something's wrong?"

He looked... tired. What has been commonplace for a while, one of those things that should never become the norm, but everyone gradually just getting used to it. And okay, everyone just had a harder day at times, and Phil, on average, every two months had moments when he was only kept alive by coffee, because it wasn't always possible to get through with work and childcare. But the last time Techno saw him so exhausted was over two years ago, when he himself went out of his way to worry him and lead him to the brink of a nervous breakdown. Sometimes he was still ashamed of it. And maybe he was looking for an opportunity to somehow atone for it and actually help at least once instead of making everything more difficult.

He shook his head, grabbing the glasses before they hit the floor.

"No. Just..." He hesitated for a second. "There's going to be a festival in the park. A small one, nothing special. And they're going to make lanterns, and then they have to put them out or whatever you do with them..."

"Oh." Phil looked at him in a way that clearly revealed two things. First, he remembered that Techno was still grounded. Second: they both knew he wouldn't be able to say no. "Would you like to go?"

"Not really my style." He shrugged, putting glasses and plates in the sink, pausing for a moment and peering through the open door toward the stairs to make sure no one was listening. "But I think Wilbur would like to."

He felt a little wrong saying it so directly. He remembered that when he was very young and still 'potentially up for adoption', when Nate brought him home, he would always go out of his way to get him to interact with his family. "Smile", "Be nice", "Go play with the other children." Techno especially hated the latter, and always responded with the most twisted expression he could make. If he wanted to play, he would just do it, and the more he was forced to do it, the less he wanted to.

But Phil never considered his time with them a chore, and he always seemed downright grateful when they asked for a little more attention of their own accord. So maybe in a real family it worked a bit differently, and so did a lot of other things he had to rediscover.

"He didn't mention anything." Phil put down the rest of the dishes and turned to face him, resting his back on the table top. He looked genuinely concerned.

"Probably not." Techno swayed on his heels, his sweatshirt sleeves tucking in his fingers. There was still a smear of paint on his left thumb that he hadn't noticed before. "But maybe you could ask him?"

When he looked up, he met a warm, slightly amused gaze.

"Of course. It's a very good idea. We have not been anywhere all together for a long time."

Ah. And this is how they got to the hardest part.

"But because..." He took a deep breath, his fingers tightening on his sleeves a little tighter. "Because I wanted you to take Wilbur. Just Wilbur. I can stay with Tommy," he added quickly to get a potential obstacle out of the way immediately. "Maybe I won't kill him somehow. And even if I do, I promise not to get dirty. No blood on the carpet!"

He tried to joke, but Phil didn't look the least bit amused.

"I don't understand," he admitted, frowning and tilting his head slightly, as if he was literally trying to look at the mystery from a different perspective and find a solution.

Techno shifted from foot to foot, biting the inside of his cheek in frustration.

"Wilbur... He said a while ago that... that you and me do things together all the time, and we have our secrets... And he said he wasn't jealous, but that's a bit of bullshit, because he is. So maybe if you took him somewhere, he'd feel a little better."

He didn't get an answer right away, and for a moment, in the silence in the kitchen, Techno became seriously afraid that maybe he shouldn't have brought up the subject after all. But then he heard a chair shuffle, and when he looked up, Phil was seated at the table and gestured for him to sit next to him.

"I had no idea he thought so," he said, and oh, Techno knew the tone, the remorse and self-regret that were almost palpable at a distance. Sometimes he wondered if their father would remember for certain that he was only human and couldn't solve a million problems at once and predict every tragedy.

"He's a little right, isn't he?" He said, sitting down next to him, still tiring his sleeves, stretching them to the limit. "I mean, not that you really like me more, or something, just..." He paused, feeling his knee begin to twitch nervously. "Sometimes I'm a little scared too. And that's so stupid, because just because you don't pay your full attention to me doesn't mean you don't like me anymore, and I really know it. But when I'm having a bad day, I forget about it a bit, sometimes. And... And the voices say that you don't want me anymore and they don't want to shut up," he added a little more quietly. And then he held his breath for a moment as Phil put his hand on his and squeezed lightly in mute assurance. 'Everything's fine. You're safe.' He looked up, forcing a faint smile. "So you'll take him?"

He knew the answer perfectly well, but a part of him was relieved when Phil nodded.

"Of course. I'll go talk to him right away."

The boy's shoulders relaxed a bit and he leaned his back against the backrest, reassured.

"But don't say I told you," he said, just to be sure.

"Not a word." Phil nodded seriously, then smiled and embraced him tightly. "Thank you."

Techno hesitantly raised his hands, returning the hug, somewhat surprised.

"What for?"

"For being a good brother. And for believing in me." Phil stepped back, one hand still on his shoulder, the other pushing his hair out of his face. "Even if the voices say otherwise."

That night, for the first time in a long, long time, the ice desert felt a little less cold and scary.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

it's supposed to be longer chapter, but I need more attention- I mean, I decided to split it in two, because first part is kinda nice, and the second... not so much. And I wanted to give you guys one more fluffy update before all the angst hit.

So, here's one chapter, and I'm gonna publish the second one on sunday. Enjoy while you still can.

Also, it's here thanks to @Katricia! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno has always known that being good and helpful is a highly overrated business and it doesn't pay off as much as everyone tries to convince him it does. Of course, it was nice to see Wilbur smiling and excited for the first time in a long time, for the next three days just talking about the upcoming festival. It was even nicer to watch him carry tons of paper into the living room and learn from the internet with Phil to assemble the lanterns, with a little help from Tommy in decorating. Techno didn't try to join the fun, it wasn't his time and he wasn't going to disturb it, but he felt some sort of satisfaction hearing the laughter and lively conversations downstairs. His brother deserved to feel important and needed again.

Unfortunately, everything came at a price. And in this case, it was six years old, had excess energy, and was producing more words per minute than the average person in an hour.

"Try to put him to sleep at his normal time, okay?" Phil asked, though the way he looked down at the child clutching at him with all limbs made it clear that it was a rather loose suggestion and he had no major hopes. Everyone had seen Tommy surreptitiously throw at least three wrappers of stolen candy bars into the trash can - for the next few hours he would probably bounce off the walls on a sugar high and not think about sitting still.

"I'll try to." Techno shrugged. "At most, I'll tie him to the bed, and that's it."

Phil gave him a scolding glance, but his face softened immediately as he knelt down to hug the child one last time, letting him hold on a little longer than necessary.

"Be good," he commanded, finally stepping back. Tommy let out a soft, aching whine, but then chuckled when he was tapped with a finger on his nose. "Listen to Techno. When I'm away, he's in charge of the house, okay?"

The boy puffed up his cheeks, glancing quickly over his shoulder and then turning his head away.

"I am big, I can rule myself!"

Phil just laughed and shook his head as he stood up and buttoned his jacket.

"Of course you are. But I want to find the house in one piece, as well as the two of you."

Wilbur, already standing in the door ajar, one hand on the doorknob, shuffled his boots impatiently.

"Can we go now?" He urged, leaning back and hanging his weight on the doorknob. "They'll take all our cool places, come ooon!"

"We'll be ahead of time anyway," Phil reassured him, but seeing his son's expression, he must have decided it would be easier not to argue any further. "Fine, fine. We're on our way. Have fun boys!"

Tommy hesitated, swayed on his heels, then ran quickly to hug Phil once more, briefly but with such desperation as if he was saying goodbye to him for life. Immediately after that, he stepped back, and although visibly sad, he silently stood beside Techno, leaning his head against his shoulder, looking for a bit of comfort.

"Bye Phil!" He exclaimed again. "Bye Wilby!" Wilbur turned, smiling broadly with all the possible levels of malice, and the boy blushed instantly. "Wilbur! I said Wilbur! And you're ugly!"

He spun on his heel, running into the house so fast that he almost slipped on the panels. Techno sighed inwardly, following him slowly, more and more convinced with each passing second that he had made a big mistake.

"You'll be sick," he said, watching Tommy take the opportunity and stand on a chair, reaching for the top cabinet to get the Coke cans and chips. "You'll be sick and puke, and I won't feel sorry for you at all."

The boy just turned to stick out his tongue. Then, with a squeal, he jumped off the chair as Techno actually started towards him. They just stared at each other from opposite sides of the table for a moment, waiting for their opponent to move, until Tommy finally broke the tension and ran to the living room, throwing himself on the couch as if it were the last safe space in the asylum law.

"I can do what I want!" He insisted, kicking his legs in the air, pressing his precious prey tightly to his chest.

"You have to do what I tell you." Techno finally grabbed his ankles and pulled him off the couch, holding him upside down, his hair almost touching the ground. He shook him lightly for effect, and an immediate screeching sound rose through the house so loudly that the

neighbors would most likely have reported disturbing the curfew if they hadn't gotten used to it already. "So, where did I leave the leash?"

"You don't have one!" Tommy made a daring attempt to kick him in the nose, but the only effect was that he dropped the can and it rolled across the floor. "Let me go!"

Techno raised his eyebrows.

"Do you want to bet?" He snorted, but carefully put the kid down on the carpet. If he was going to be sick, it would be better because of his own stupidity and greed. "I'll give you what you want to eat, if you promise to go to sleep when I tell you."

The boy, still flattened on the floor and reaching for the discarded can, just looked at him, smiling mockingly.

"And what if I don't go?" He asked in a tone he copied from Wilbur. But the panic when he was caught by the ankles the second time was his own. "Okay! Okay, I promise, I promise!"

"Good. It's supposed to stay that way, okay?" He nudged the child with his foot to the side. "If you want to watch something with me, get up."

Tommy didn't need any additional encouragement.

"We'll watch 'Up!'" He demanded, reaching for the remote, but Techno snatched it from his hands before he even realized it.

"No way. We've watched it a million times, I can't look at this movie anymore. Choose something else."

A few screams, a few threats, and one knee dent on the couch later, they agreed on 'Moana'. Tommy, offended at first, fidgeting and jumping around on the couch to show how much he wasn't interested in anything that wasn't his favorite obsession, after a few minutes was staring at the screen hypnotized, mouth half open and a forgotten bag of chips on his lap. When he was focused and not talking (and sometimes even when he was babbling hard), he was surprisingly pleasant company. Techno figured he would miss it a bit when Sam finally found a new home for the kid. He hadn't planned to miss him, not really, but maybe he had gotten a bit used to being constantly noisy in the house, and maybe he liked to jostle with an opponent that was twice as small, and maybe he was going to miss the kind of sincere admiration the boy looked at him sometimes, as if he saw in Techno an authority and a role model.

He didn't want Tommy to stay. He didn't even consider it, knowing that if he started thinking, he wouldn't be able to stop thinking about it anymore, he wouldn't be able to get rid of the fear that was always lurking somewhere in the shadows, just waiting for the right moment. Tommy was with them 'for a while'. It was a state of transition, it was a hurricane that passed through their home and then vanished over the horizon so that they could, in peace, step by step, repair the damage and rebuild their former lives. Tommy couldn't stay, he had no right to stay, not when he was absolutely everything Techno couldn't be, not when Wilbur loved

him so much, not when Phil looked so good holding him in his arms. Not when the words 'dad' and 'brother' sounded so natural in his mouth.

Tommy couldn't stay - because Techno wasn't ready to leave and wasn't going to give up his family without a fight.

But for now, as long as Sam didn't call, as long as it was 'for a while', he could allow himself a little weakness. He could afford to chase the boy around the house and throw him into a bathtub full of water with his clothes on when he flatly refused to take a bath, and he could laugh a lot louder than he should when they made a little flood in the bathroom together and eventually both had to change into dry pajamas. He could threaten to really tie him to the bed if he didn't finally go to sleep, and read more than one chapter of the book as the boy dramatically rolled from side to side, claiming that he would never, ever fall asleep again.

"Everyone has cool names here, too," he complained when another character in the novel turned out to have a name created by randomly selecting letters. "I'd like to, too."

Techno rolled his eyes, but kept the comment to himself that sometimes over-creativity was a curse. Especially if an adult decides to take it completely seriously. 'Techno Blade', goddamn it...

"You can be called Theseus," he prompted, because, of the two bad ones, if you already have a nickname, at least have a good one. And maybe, maybe a little bit, he hoped that the child would one day pick up at least a bit of a passion for mythology... "It's a bit like 'Tommy'."

To his satisfaction, the boy immediately stopped playing with Henry's ears and sat up in bed, keenly interested.

"Who's Theseus?"

"A Greek hero." He put the book aside and moved a little closer, resting his back against the wall. "He killed the minotaur."

"What's a minotaur?"

"Scary monster, half man half bull." He reached for a stuffed cow and pretended to try to attack him with it. Tommy chuckled as he shoved his hands away, and encouraged, he stepped closer on all fours, almost sitting on his lap. "He lived in a maze and the people of Athens had to give him seven men and seven women every year. Theseus decided to save them."

"Wow." The child's eyes flashed and his lips parted in silent admiration. "And he defeated the monster all by himself?"

"Almost. Princess Ariadne gave him a thread so that he would not get lost in the maze."

Tommy beamed even more if possible.

"The girls liked him?" He asked in a whisper, and Techno couldn't help finding it damn cute.

"I think so." He shrugged. "He was a hero."

"And what happened next?"

This time Techno hesitated, not quite sure what to say. The story of Theseus, although certainly interesting, was not entirely suitable for children, and the hero himself was not a particularly good role model.

"Um..." He rubbed his nose as he tried to play for time. "He did something stupid and got exiled and had to flee to Skyros. It's an island," he added quickly. "Its king welcomed him as a friend, but then he got jealous and threw him off the cliff."

Tommy didn't seem to expect this to happen, for a few seconds he stared at him expectantly, as if he was still hoping for a happy ending.

"Oh." When he finally realized that he would not get one, his excitement visibly subsided and he frowned. "But that's so mean."

Techno knew a few other, slightly more accurate, words for a betrayal that ended in a long flight down a cliff, but he decided that 'mean' was also suitable as a last resort.

"Yhm. It happens." He shrugged, and when Tommy yawned broadly in response, pushed him back against the pillow. "Okay, that's it. Time's up, it's time to sleep!"

The child, obviously, had no intention of giving up without a fight.

"Nooo...! Technooo, come on...! Don't be like this!"

"It's late anyway, Phil wouldn't let you stay up this long." Techno threw the covers over his head in one move. "Sleep. Now."

"Hey! Wait!" Tommy kicked the covers off, only to be hit in the face again. "No, no! I want to show you something!" This time he managed to untangle himself in the sheets and flashed under the older boy's outstretched arms. He leaped to the desk and rummaged through the drawer until he finally pulled something from the bottom and, very pleased with himself, held out his clenched hand. "Here!"

Techno hesitantly reached out and after a while a small, shapeless, black nugget landed on his hand. He twisted it in his fingers a few times before looking at the baby from under his raised eyebrows.

"Wow. A stone." He nodded his head in mock approval. "That's amazing."

Tommy was already climbing back onto the bed to take the clearly precious gem from him.

"If you do that, it sparkles!" He said, rubbing the stone against his sleeve and lifting it into the light. He narrowed his eyes as tiny reflections actually fell on his face. "Drista gave it to me. I mean, she threw it at me, but it's pretty, so that's okay. And Phil said it could be a very rare one!"

Techno raised his eyebrows.

"Phil said that?" He repeated, sighing inwardly. Apparently things just haven't changed. Stones magically became rare, art galleries battled against shapeless scribbles, and cones with blue glitter... they have not ended up in the trash to this day. Which in itself was a much better fate than they deserved.

Tommy didn't seem to sense the irony in his voice, as he slipped under his arm, climbed onto his lap, and leaning his head against his chest, he tilted his head back, smiling broadly at him.

"Yes! And he said it was called 'bedrock'. And that it's very cool that I collect stones, because the stones are very interesting." He put the rock back in Techno's hand, sliding his fingers over it one last time, almost reverently. "Nobody ever thought the stones were interesting. Or that what I'm doing is cool. And Phil even carries one stone on his hand, in a bracelet. And he says it is very valuable."

Techno felt his ears suddenly start to burn.

"Oh," he muttered and then cleared his throat. "Really?"

He tried to hand the child back the stone, but Tommy just shook his head as he pushed his hand away.

"For you," he said seriously, and then, seeing the upcoming protest, he quickly added, "I have a second one! So you can take this one. We'll fit together!"

Techno looked at the stone, glistening gently in the light of the lamp, and then a little lower, at the boy's flushed, excited face, and felt his stomach twist.

"Are you sure you don't want to give it to Wilbur?" He assured himself, unable to say for himself what answer he was expecting more.

He certainly hadn't expected Tommy to turn around and, wrapping his arms around him tightly, snuggle against his chest, holding him as tightly as if his life depended on it.

"Wilbur remembers he likes me anyway," he said after a moment, resting his cheek on his shoulder. "And you need something to remember."

Techno swallowed and opened his mouth as he tried to answer, but he couldn't find the right words and no sound wanted to come out of his tightened throat, so he just looked down at his hands, trembling and ready to hug back at any moment.

He put his hands on the boy's shoulders, pushing him away from him, carefully but firmly.

"Okay, enough," he cleared his throat to hide how much his voice was breaking. "Get under the covers."

It took another twenty minutes for him to convince the child that yes, sleep is very important and he needs it first to grow and second, to not earn a decent kick right now, but in the end he emerged victorious and could throw himself on his own bed, more tired than he expected it to

be. He was almost falling asleep, staring sleepily at the black pebble lying on the bedside table, when he heard the click of a lock and whispers from below, and then footsteps on the stairs, some fast, some much softer and more careful. He closed his eyes, trying to catch his breath, but winced involuntarily as the door to the room swung open and a beam of harsh light fell directly on his face.

"Oh. Did I wake you up?" Phil smiled apologetically as he stepped inside leaving a narrow gap to keep them from sitting in complete darkness. "Sorry, I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Techno shrugged as he sat on the bed and rubbed his eyes.

"It was fine," he said, shifting around so Phil could sit down next to him. His hair was slightly damp, his face flushed, and he smelled of cool autumn air, but he looked happier and calmer than ever in the last weeks. "Wilbur didn't burn anything?"

"Somehow we did not call the firefighters." Phil laughed and immediately put his hand over his mouth, lowering his voice so as not to accidentally wake Tommy. They both knew perfectly well that it would take far too much time and energy to make him go to bed a second time. "Go back to sleep, it's late. We'll talk in the morning."

He stroked his son's cheek with his still cold hand and was about to stand up when Techno grabbed his hand, holding him in place.

"Can I...?" He began, but hesitated, not really knowing what exactly he wanted to start with or what he needed to hear. He glanced again at the bedside table, at the pebble glistening in the pale light, and slowly released his fingers. "No, nothing... It doesn't matter."

Phil slowly sat back down on the mattress, a little closer than before. The amusement on his face was replaced by sadness, and Techno immediately felt bad about spoiling even those rare moments of peace. He should have kept his mouth shut, he should be more careful, he should deal with his own problems instead of burdening everyone around him and demanding sympathy, when he was the bad guy, when he broke everything, when-

"You know you can tell me anything, right?"

He looked up, then looked away, unable to meet Phil's eyes.

"You've been saying that a lot lately," he smirked, trying to joke about it, but he was under no illusion that the plan would work. And in fact, right after that, he felt a bigger hand on his, squeezing his fingers in a silent reminder that he didn't have to, or shouldn't, pretend.

"Because I get the feeling you forget about it sometimes." Phil smiled sadly and looked for a moment somewhere over his shoulder, clearly pondering something deeply. "You know that frogs can adjust their body temperature to the environment?"

Techno blinked in complete surprise, but quickly shook off the first shock.

"Wilbur told you that?" He asked, rolling his eyes as Phil put his hand to his heart, inhaling loudly.

"It hurts me that you think that I can't be smart on my own," he replied resentfully, but quickly broke under the eloquent gaze. "Of course Wilbur told me."

"Of course." If they got a pound for every useless piece of information Wilbur gave them like the holy grail of science, they could have gotten a good gag to silence him once and for all. "So what about the frog?"

Phil turned more towards him, leaning forward a little as if he was revealing some great secret.

"If you put a frog in a pot of hot water, it'll pop out because, well, it's not stupid and wants to survive. But if you put it in cold water and slowly heat it up, the frog will raise its own temperature to match its surroundings. And when it finally gets too hot, it won't have the strength to run anymore," he concluded dramatically, spreading his hands as if to say 'what to do, it happens'.

Techno waited a moment longer, hoping a little for a more sensible punch line, but of course, as with all Phil's wisdom, he had to figure it out himself.

"Are you trying to tell me I could be boiled alive?"

"I'm trying to tell you that sometimes you choke your emotions too much and you try to deal with everything alone unnecessarily. And when it does get bad, you are already too tired to react."

Of all the things Techno wanted to hear tonight, this one was definitely not on the list. Not that he didn't see how much truth there was to it - he was just not prepared for such brutal honesty and pointing out all the mistakes he had made recently.

He pulled his knees up to his chin, wrapping his arms tightly around them.

"I'd rather be that goddamn flea," he muttered under his breath, but still loud enough for Phil to hear.

"What?"

"Nothing. Another one of Wilbur's things." He sighed heavily, staring at his own fingers, pulling on the loose thread from his pants. "I'm trying, you know? Really."

"I know." Phil combed his hair, the tone of his voice telling him that he was speaking completely honestly. "But it's okay if you need help. Remember that, okay?"

Techno wanted to remind him that he really shouldn't comment on it, not when Phil keeps forgetting himself that he can rely on them too and is not the only one responsible for all the problems in the family. But he didn't want to spoil the rest of the good mood, so he just nodded and let Phil kiss the top of his head, and then, as the door closed and the last source of

light vanished, he curled up under the covers, silently promising that this time he would really try to keep his word.

Phil used to say, "Don't set yourself on fire to keep others warm," but he was ready to burn the world to ashes to protect his children. Techno really didn't want to have to test it, didn't want to leave Tommy behind in the smoke and rubble. But with each day, with each sleepless night, and with each nightmare, he was more and more afraid that he would eventually freeze to death.

Chapter End Notes

Did you enjoy it? Yes? Good. Remember that feeling, it won't be back soon.

We're goin down, woohoo!

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

:)

Chapter Notes

I worked at this chapter with @Katricia! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno woke up early on saturday even by his own standards. It was still dark outside, raindrops were dripping down the windowpane, and the house seemed utterly silent and devoid of any signs of life. It was only when he slipped out from under the covers, pulled a pair of thick socks over his feet, and opened the door a crack, that he was able to hear muffled voices coming from below, meaning that he wasn't the only one who couldn't stay in bed any longer. He descended the stairs, lit by the light from the living room, which, however, was completely empty. It was only in the kitchen that he found Phil pouring boiling water over his coffee, and Wilbur, practically lying on the table, with his arms stretched out on the counter and his head resting on them. They both turned at the footsteps, but only one smiled at the sight of him.

"Did you sleep well?" Phil asked, ruffling his son's hair, but something in his voice, in his tired, sad look, made Techno frown, feeling a surge of anxiety.

"Something's wrong," he said more than asked, slipping out from under the hand still stroking his head. The way Phil withdrew his hand, slowly and hesitatingly, as if he needed all of himself to postpone the inevitable just a moment longer, only fueling his unease.

"Tommy's still asleep?" He replied with a question to the question, turning to pretend that he was very engrossed in pouring sugar into his coffee.

If Techno had no other worries at this point, he would have begun to wonder at what point he became the one who was asked this question. At what point he actually knew best where Tommy was and what he was doing. At which point would he become part of what Tommy was doing at the time.

"I can wake him up," Wilbur offered in a sleepy, slightly hoarse voice and was already getting out of his chair, stretching as Phil shook his head, gesturing for him to sit back down.

He turned to face them, setting his cup down and resting his hips against the sink.

"Sam called." He said, and in the fallen silence his voice seemed much louder and stronger. Or maybe it was the words themselves and their meanings. "An hour ago."

Techno looked down at his feet.

Finally. Finally, he heard what he had been waiting for months, what he looked for every day, what he imagined every evening.

He stared down at his own socks, feeling the invisible rope tighten around his throat. Two days ago, Tommy was running around the house in his socks, sliding on any reasonably straight surface until he tripped and nearly fell down the stairs. It ended up with a small bruise, but Techno had to stick dinosaur patches on both knees and elbows to stop him whining.

And now he finally got what he wanted.

Why wasn't he happy?

Wilbur was the first to break the heavy silence.

"For what?" He asked, which was probably the stupidest question possible, because they knew, everyone knew from the very beginning. But Wilbur's chest was rising and falling faster and faster and panic was building in his eyes and he looked as helpless as if someone had just taken his beloved thing and smashed it on the ground in front of him.

Phil took a deep breath, apparently noticing it as well, because when he spoke again, his voice was much softer, as if he were talking to a toddler. Not in the condescending way adults used when they felt wiser and that Techno genuinely hated. Phil never treated them as if they were too stupid to understand. But he knew that sometimes there was just too much of everything, and the world seemed too big and the truth too overwhelming to just accept it.

"He found a family interested in looking after Tommy. He thinks they would be... good for him."

Wilbur was breathing faster and faster, gasping for air in long gulps and looking around, desperately looking for any support.

"But... But why now?" He gasped in a high, trembling voice. "It's- It's mid-term. You shouldn't change schools in the middle of the year, you said yourself, it was wrong that I moved so often. He'll know no one there and will be alone and-"

Phil crouched down in front of him, placing a hand on his lap, and shook his head, silencing the ever-faster flow of words.

"Wilbur." He raised a hand to brush the hair from his forehead. "We both know it doesn't matter."

Even from across the kitchen, Techno was able to see his brother's eyes shine suddenly in the pale light of the lamp.

"I don't want him to go." The first tears ran down his cheeks, and Phil immediately wiped them away with his hands, muttering reassuringly.

"Shhh, come on... I know you don't want to. And I believe you're right." He turned to look at the other son, clearly looking for his confirmation. Techno had no idea what his face was expressing at that moment. He didn't even know what he was feeling. "Tommy's very attached to us. Much more than he should be, and unfortunately it's mostly my fault." He grimaced slightly guiltily. "That's why I asked Sam what the chances were for him to stay with us."

Techno felt as if someone had hit him hard in the chest, forcing all the air out of his lungs.

Wilbur blinked and straightened, hastily wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

"And?" He urged, clenching his hands on the seat of the chair and flexing all his muscles in anticipation.

Phil's lips twitched into a smile, but he managed to keep his face straight.

"The family he found is not entirely convinced of adoption, and Tommy knows us and has managed to like us," he paused for a moment, as if to add to the drama. "So we would have priority."

Wilbur practically jumped in his chair.

"So he can stay?" He made sure, and when Phil nodded, he immediately practically threw himself on his neck, almost knocking him off his feet. "Yes! *Do it!* Dad, please, please, you have to do this! You have to!" He pulled back to meet his eyes, his hands tightly clasped on his shirt all the time. "I'll do what you want and I'll be good and study well and... And I can wash the dishes for the rest of my life!"

Phil raised his eyebrows.

"For the rest of your life?"

"Yes." He nodded very seriously, blinking back the tears a second time. "Daily. And when I move out, I'll also be coming home just to do it. I swear!"

"Well, I'd love to see it." Phil laughed, kissing the boy on the forehead, but his smile instantly faded as he turned his face towards the door. "Techno?"

Techno didn't answer. He wasn't able to.

One of his clearest childhood memories was from house Number Three. He was only seven years old, sitting on the bed, the world around him blurring and losing focus, voices reaching him somewhere in the distance, completely incomprehensible. The air was thick, the harsh

july sun shining through the open window, and the tiniest hand of a clock moved slowly along the dial, rumbling so loudly in his head that he wanted to cover his ears.

Apparently he was crying. Apparently he was screaming and throwing things and begging for a long, long time before he finally fell silent completely and just let time go on somewhere beyond him. He couldn't remember any of those things, nothing but emptiness and a regret so deep that even years later, he still couldn't put a word to it. He couldn't describe how overwhelmed he felt, how small and insignificant and helpless he was at that moment. As if he was drifting in a vacuum, all alone and without any focal point, with the weight of the entire universe pressing on from all sides. He couldn't explain that he felt every bit of his body, and at the same time he was somewhere completely outside of it, besides all this, and everything around him was screaming for something, anything, but he could only sit helplessly and listen to the loud ticking noise.

There was no clock in the kitchen. Not since Wilbur had managed to knock it off the wall in one of their scuffles and smash the glass to pieces. Together, they wrapped it in a garbage bag, buried the evidence in the garden, and over the next two days stubbornly persuaded Phil that no clock had ever existed.

There was no clock in the kitchen. But Techno could have sworn he heard a low, rhythmic rumble. He had read about a murderer who was haunted by the victim's heartbeat, hidden under the floor. Perhaps in the same way his own conscience made itself felt. Maybe it was punishing him for how scared he was, how loud everything in him shouted 'No!', how hurt and betrayed he felt, even if he knew, deep down he knew it was the only right option.

He felt a tight grip on his shoulders, hands drawing him back to reality, and he took a deep breath, as if he had just surfaced to the surface of the water. He could have sworn he felt the icy waves trying to pull him down again, but Phil's hands were strong and steady, so Techno clung to them with all his might, trying to understand where he was and what was going on.

"Techno, are you okay?" The voices reached him as though through a thick fog, distant and strange. "Hey kiddo, can you hear me?"

Everything was so clear, so bloody bright and blurry at the same time, the sounds soft but pounding in his ears and he just wanted it all to end.

"You said it wasn't for forever," he stammered, still struggling for every breath. He didn't recognize his own voice, he didn't recognize his own words, his own thoughts... "You said it was just for a while. You promised."

"Techno-"

"I trusted you!" He shouted, and that was how the whole world trembled once more before time returned to its normal rhythm and he was suddenly standing in the center of the kitchen, sweat running down his temples and his hands trembling, clutching his father's shoulders. And it was quiet, so damn, so damn quiet...

Phil watched him silently, alertly and penetratingly, seeming to be reading his thoughts. And then slowly, carefully, as if afraid that the slightest movement might be a mistake, he raised

his hands to cup Techno's face in them.

"Hey, come on, take it easy." He stroked his cheek with his thumb, never looking away. "I'm not going to do anything you both don't agree to, okay?"

Techno sniffed loudly. It took three tries before he finally let his voice out.

"You said he wouldn't stay forever," he admonished regretfully, backing up a few steps, out of reach of his warm, safe arms. "You promised."

"So what?" He heard from the side and instinctively turned his head, just in time to see his brother get up from the table and walk a little closer, his face sharp, angry, but his hands trembling. "But he *can* stay. *Has to* stay!"

Phil glanced at him, clearly not knowing which boy to focus on first.

"Wilbur."

"No! It's not fair!" Now Wilbur was shaking all over, clenching his fists, and his voice carried all over the kitchen, loud and high-pitched. "You want him to stay too! I know you want him to! There is- It's two to one. It's voted!"

"Wilbur, it's a family decision, you can't-"

"I don't care! Why does it always have to be the way Techno wants? Why can't we do what I want for once?"

Phil held out his hand to him.

"Techno is your brother-"

"So is Tommy!"

The hand froze in the air, then stepped back. Techno watched its movement, hearing his own breathing, too loud in the sudden silence, too shallow in the thickening air.

"I don't want him to stay," he whispered, as if saying it again would make a difference, make everyone understand. And he felt so horrible about how badly he needed it, how much he wished someone would admit he was right, even if he knew perfectly well he wasn't.

Somewhere up the stairs a pair of feet thumped on the steps, then quick footsteps echoed through the living room.

"Phil?" Tommy's voice, sleepy and mixed with a yawn, made him almost painful. "What happened?"

Techno didn't want to look at him. He didn't want to see him now, didn't want to meet his eyes after everything he'd just said, not when his mere presence made everything five times worse, a million times more difficult.

But then Wilbur passed him, practically running straight towards the kid, tearing him off the ground, pressing tightly against his chest.

Over his shoulder, Techno saw a pair of eyes wide open in astonishment.

"Wilby?" Tommy swung his legs in the air, but Wilbur only shook his head and carried him wordlessly towards the stairs, clutching as if he were afraid that if he loosened his grip the boy would disappear forever.

In part, that was what was about to happen. In part, Techno himself delivered the verdict when he pressed his lips tight and didn't take back his own words.

And maybe Wilbur hated him for it as much as he hated himself.

* * *

Sam showed up at their house three days later, as tired as the last time, though a little less bored. Maybe because it was really hard to remain indifferent to Tommy, ready to go - in a red coat and backpack over his shoulder - but still clinging tightly to Wilbur's arm. Techno expected him to cry. He had expected screams and hysteria and nights that Phil would have to spend calming him down and tugging him to sleep. But Tommy took the news surprisingly calmly. He fell silent, visibly sad, and most of the time he didn't respond to any suggestions to play, but he continued to come down to meals and started packing his things before anyone even mentioned it. He just followed them with his big eyes all the time, seeming not to understand how they could have done it to him, like a puppy left on the side of the road as the car vanished around a bend.

Techno couldn't take it. He couldn't stand the look that burned his skin and filled his head with thoughts he never wanted to hear again. But still, even keeping his distance at all times, even avoiding meals and spending his days in the room, he took it far better than Wilbur.

He knew he should expect it. He knew his brother would blame him, be furious, and would probably never forgive him for it. But he hadn't expected the sight of Wilbur standing in the doorway to his room, red-eyed and teary-faced, his shallow breath and trembling shoulders and eyes full of wild despair, would break his heart so much.

"Tell me you've changed your mind," he demanded, in a voice that was probably supposed to sound threatening, but the broken sobs made him much less terrible and more desperate. "Tell dad Tommy can stay. Techno, please, *please*..."

Techno pulled the covers tighter over his head, pressing his hands to his ears, trying to pretend he couldn't hear. He hears no pleas, hears no calls, he does not hear the soft crying coming from Tommy's room at night.

"It'll be fine," he heard the first night, as he tiptoed over to the door. "Don't be sad..."

Wilbur just cried louder as Tommy kept repeating over and over again words of assurance.

Phil seemed to hold the best of them all. Keyword: seemed. Techno knew him too well not to see how sad his smile had gotten, with what longing he looks at the child when he thinks no one sees him, instinctively reaching out to ruffle his hair, but holds back in half a gesture, probably not wanting to give more hope to neither Tommy nor himself.

Techno didn't want to worry him, he didn't want to make things worse, he didn't want to ask for help when he himself was the cause of all the problems. But he couldn't withstand the constant remorse and finally gave in last night, opening Phil's bedroom door ajar and carefully slipping into his bed.

"You're mad at me too, aren't you?" He asked softly as he was immediately drawn closer. He didn't look up, hiding his face in the arm around him, as if he could really hide like that for the rest of his life.

"Of course not." Phil's voice was firm, without a hint of sleepiness. Apparently, he also didn't know how to get a good rest.

Another point on the long list of things Techno managed to destroy.

"But you wanted him to stay," he said almost desperately, and when he didn't get an answer right away, he added, "I know you wanted to."

This time the silence was a little shorter, broken by a deep sigh.

"I wanted." Phil ran a hand through his hair, running his fingers through it again and again, probably more instinctively than deliberately. "Because I thought it would be best for our family. But I'm glad you said it straight out you don't want it."

Techno knew it was a lie. Even if spoken so confidently and honestly. Phil might have been the best parent he'd ever had, but that didn't change the fact that he lied damn often, in that caring way that everyone had learned to accept. He lied when he said he was not angry with them, he lied when he assured him that he wasn't hurt by the sharp words shouted out in anger, he lied when he repeated that he was not tired, that he always had time for them, that he didn't need a break from them .

He lied when he said he wasn't hurt and disappointed now.

But this time, Techno really didn't understand why and just had to ask.

"Have you ever flown by plane?" he heard in response, which explained absolutely nothing, but it meant more puzzles and searching for hidden meanings.

"You know I haven't," he muttered, completely in no mood for such lessons. Couldn't he get a simple explanation for once?

"Just before the start, you always get a lecture on what to do in the event of an accident. And one of the more important things is that if you're told to wear an oxygen mask, you put it on first and then you worry about others. Especially if you are traveling with children. Do you

know why?" Phil stepped back a bit to be able to look at him, and this time Techno didn't look away. "Because if you pass out, there's no one to take care of them. It's important to help others. But you also have to think about yourself and how you feel. A good lifeguard is a safe lifeguard. I know it's hard to accept that we can't always do what seems right. But you're only human, Techno. You're just a child. You have your limits, like everyone else. I could never be angry about that."

Techno was on the tip of the tongue that all this morality was worth shit when Phil himself was so hopeless at taking care of himself and constantly putting their welfare ahead of his own. But he bit his tongue, knowing full well that he would only hear again that parents were bound by different rules.

The rules were different for everyone but him because he was simply too stupid to follow them. Too stupid, too nightmarish, too selfish - and he could hear each of those accusations in his head every time he looked at Tommy clutching Wilbur's arm tightly.

"Okay, I assume you have all your stuff?" Sam asked, eyeing the two suitcases with some disbelief. Phil had somehow managed to fit the entire boy's room in it, and Wilbur added half of his. "I'll take it to the car so you have time to say goodbye, what do you say?"

Tommy nodded, his chin quivering, betraying how far he was from wanting to say goodbye to anyone, but then he took a deep breath and smiled broadly.

"I'm going to miss you very much," he said, embracing Wilbur's waist and cuddling against him, slowly, as if he wanted to remember every second of this closeness. He was immediately pulled closer and locked into an embrace as hard as it was desperate. "But you will write to me, right?" He looked up just in time to see Wilbur nodding his head, trying his best not to cry. "Ah. That's good. Because it would be stupid if I learned to write for nothing."

The older boy gave a short laugh, which sounded very hysterical, then carefully cupped the boy's face in his trembling hands.

"You remember what I told you, right?" He asked seriously, but quickly relaxed his shoulders as Tommy nodded vigorously.

"I'll be very careful and try and give them a chance," he recited, nodding his head against each word as if he was trying to literally stick them in his head. He looked up, still smiling, but his eyes became a damp haze. "Wil... Wilby, you'll always be my brother, you know?"

Wilbur squeezed his eyes shut tightly and hugged him once more, probably so he could wipe his tears surreptitiously.

"Don't say that, I will cry..." he joked, but when he finally let the boy out of his embrace, holding his arms up for a moment, it was obvious that for a very long time no one would hear his real laugh.

Phil seemed to be trying to keep his distance and avoid a tearful goodbye, probably assuming that a sharp cut healed faster and easier. He hadn't foreseen, however, that he didn't have

much to say about it, so as soon as he crouched down in front of the child, Tommy immediately threw himself around his neck, almost knocking him off his feet.

"Phil?" He sniffed, hiding its face in his shoulder. "I said that I like Tubbo the most in the world- I like you almost as much."

Phil's hands trembled slightly as he placed one on the boy's head, the other slowly stroking his back.

"I like you a lot, too," he said, then glanced toward the door, making sure Sam was still not in sight. "Tommy." He took the kid by the shoulders, pushing him slightly, wincing slightly at his pained whine. "Listen carefully. This" He took a small piece of paper neatly folded in two from his pocket "is my phone number. If something happens, anything goes wrong, if you have any trouble, or... or if you need any help, please give me a call, okay?" He looked the boy straight in the eye, waiting a moment for him to nod. "Put that note somewhere where no one can find it, and don't tell anyone until you're sure you're safe. Understand me?"

Tommy nodded equally seriously as he tucked the note into his pocket.

"It's our secret," he agreed, putting a finger to his lips. "And I have something for you too!" He reached into the other pocket and held out his hand with a pendant on it, a green heart he had asked for once in a store. Phil picked them up carefully, holding his breath for a moment. "It was supposed to be for mom, but..." he hesitated. "But she wouldn't like it anyway. Because she never liked anything from me. And you did, and... And I want you to have it. So that you don't forget about me."

Phil shook his head, slowly looking up from the pendant.

"I'll never forget you," he assured, and the boy smiled as brightly as he could, seeming to light up the whole room.

And then his lips twitched, tears welled up in his eyes, and he suddenly cried out loud and with all possible childlike despair.

"Phil, but I don't want to... I don't want to go anywhere. Phil- Phil, *please*, I want to stay here."

Techno looked away, so he heard more than saw Phil hugging the boy, whispering in his ear, assuring him that everything would be okay. He felt like an intruder, standing in the middle of a scene that he himself was asking for, and which he couldn't even enjoy.

He didn't want Tommy to go away. He didn't want to look at his family without him, in despair and experiencing the loss that had been foretold from the beginning, and yet it surprised everyone. He didn't want to condemn the child to the unknown, to wandering around houses, to everything that he had to go through himself and what he sometimes dreamed of at night. But he couldn't voluntarily give back everything he had somehow won. He wasn't going to let anyone, not even Tommy, take his place.

Sam appeared in the door moments later, grunting significantly.

"Sorry to rush, but we really have to go." He smiled apologetically as he watched Phil slowly, hesitantly move away from the boy. "We have a long way to go, you know..."

Techno was sure everyone understood perfectly. Which didn't mean that in their soul they didn't wish him all the worst.

Tommy wiped his cheeks with his sleeve, sniffed again, and suddenly turned to face him. For a moment they stood staring at each other, and the air between them seemed to thicken more and more, the silence dragged on, the tension growing.

The child smiled slightly and raised a hand to wave at him.

"Bye bye, Techno Blade."

And maybe it was a matter of remorse, maybe that he didn't want to stand out from the rest, maybe a pink strand of hair that stood out against the pale hair. Or maybe a black pebble in his pocket that seemed to weigh as if it weighed a ton and burn live fire through the fabric of his trousers. But Techno just took a step forward and leaned in, hugging the boy, holding the boy for one brief moment before stepping back, flustered.

"Goodbye, Theseus," he whispered so that only he could hear.

When the door closed and the car pulled out of the driveway, the house went completely quiet.

Chapter End Notes

I REGRET NOTHING!

(I'm gonna fix it, tho, I promise)

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

What a perfect evening to hurt everyone :D

And @Katricia! helped me with it!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Techno predicted that the following weeks might be difficult.

Difficult for Wilbur, closed in his room, for Phil, instinctively setting a table for four, and even for him, in the midst of all this sadness and unspeakable regret. He knew that his brother would pass him in the corridor without a word, leave the room as soon as he appeared at the door, and from time to time glance at him with such fiery hatred that he could feel its heat on his skin. He knew Phil would try to pretend it was okay, that he would smile at him, joke, and hesitate for only a second before starting to braid his braid. He knew that nothing would be the same as it used to be, that something had changed and that not for a long time, or perhaps never, would it return to normal.

He certainly didn't anticipate being in the middle of a civil war, trapped between two opposing sides.

It began on the third day when Wilbur left his room voluntarily for the first time and appeared in the kitchen, peering into the pot and wincing as if he had seen the site of a bloody crime.

"I don't like stews," he grunted, setting the lid down with a little more panache than was necessary. Phil, so far smiling at him with obvious hope, flinched.

"Oh." After all, he was still trying to stay calm and take control of the situation. "Since when?"

There was a playful note in his voice, but Wilbur either missed it or deliberately ignored it.

"About three years."

Techno shifted nervously in his chair, suddenly wishing he had moved out of sight in time. He knew where this was going, and he didn't like it a bit, but he didn't quite know what he could do to change that and not make things even worse.

The rest of the smile slipped from Phil's face, and his hand tightened a little tighter on the tea cup.

"You never said..."

Wilbur shrugged.

"What for? It's just what Techno says that counts anyway," he said, and before anyone could answer him, before they could shake off the shock, he turned and left the kitchen, leaving a heavy silence ringing in his ears.

Phil put his cup down slowly and turned away, his hands resting on the sink, probably so that no one could see his face, but the despair that emanated from him was more than proof that the harsh words hit exactly where they were aimed.

Techno slowly got up from the table, trying to find any consolation, reaching out to touch a slightly trembling shoulder, but he quickly pulled it back as Phil suddenly straightened, grabbed the pot and, without saying a word, threw all its contents into the trash in one smooth movement.

"How about a pizza?" He asked, not even looking at his son, already taking the phone out of his pocket and reaching into the fridge for one of the leaflets attached with a magnet.

Techno didn't answer. He didn't think anyone expected it from him at all.

And then it only got worse.

Wilbur was silent at school. He didn't talk to any of his friends, didn't participate in lessons, spent most of his breaks locked in the bathroom and reacted to any contact attempt either aggressively or by completely ignoring the surroundings. He only made an exception for Dream, who was directly told to "Fuck off before he breaks his other arm", which effectively and ultimately convinced everyone that it was better to give him some space and not try to comfort him for now.

Unfortunately, the teachers were much less understanding about this and, as always, they did everything to make life even more difficult for everyone.

"What happened?" Phil asked as Wilbur burst into the house, slammed his boots against the wall, and ran upstairs wordlessly, and a moment later a door slammed. Techno, following him from a safe distance, winced at the noise and bent down to grab his jacket from the floor.

"He failed a test," he explained, focusing on untying his laces more than necessary. "In geography."

When he finally turned, Phil was still looking at him as if he expected him to say that he was just joking and to give him the real reason.

"Geography? Wilbur?" He repeated, the disbelief on his face slowly turning to sadness. "On purpose?"

Techno shrugged because, to tell the truth, he wasn't quite sure. Wilbur hadn't even picked up a pen from the table throughout the lesson, staring out the window, but something in his face, in his unseeing eyes and all that passivity, said that his thoughts were far, far away, and that he couldn't really decide anything.

Several minutes later, when Techno was trying very hard to convince himself that he was fully focused on his homework, he heard a knock and Phil's voice from down the hall.

"Wilbur? Everything's all right?"

He should be happy that his brother had finally decided to speak, perhaps for the first time that day, but somehow he wasn't when a very teary scream spread all over the house.

"Nothing's alright! My whole life is not alright!"

Techno put his headphones on and turned on the music as Phil made more attempts to smooth things over.

He was tired. So fucking tired of it all, and all he wanted was his family back.

* * *

The house without Tommy was strangely empty and quiet, as if the child had drained all the life and energy as he left. No toys scattered around the living room, no patter of feet on the stairs, no screams and complaints that someone is making fun of him again, no shoes strewn all over the hall. Without his loud, lively presence, everything seemed to stand still. Techno found a bitten apple, already slightly rotten, pressed into the bread bin, and stared at it for far too long before finally throwing it into the basket.

He missed.

No matter how much he tried to deny it - he just missed Tommy. He stared in the mirror and thought about the pink streak, the color that would be their 'family' color. He thought about Henry 'saying' nice things to him if he was sad, and now he was gone forever, tucked into one of the suitcases. He thought about 'Moana' and how he would probably never be able to watch 'Up' again.

He thought about Theseus and how his story had ended.

He deserved it. He deserved this depressing void and loneliness and the feeling that he had lost something very precious. He had made a decision, the only possible decision, and he had to live with the consequences now. With hatred from his brother and knowing that Tommy may have missed the best home possible. He could accept it. He might be used to it.

But he couldn't bear Phil's despair. His fake smile, pretending everything was fine, and how he stopped for a moment as he passed the now empty bedroom. How he was sitting on the bathroom floor when he took a stray red T-shirt out of the washing machine, how he was carefully folding a cardboard racket, taking care not to tear any folds, how he skipped a paprika stand in the supermarket, quickening his pace and looking away. Techno caught him staring at a drawing still framed and hanging on the wall one night and felt that if he didn't do something right now, if he didn't help even in the slightest, most meaningful way, he would never be able to look him in the eye again.

He reached between the books, looking for the hidden, carefully folded drawings in an envelope marked with the lopsided word 'Tubbo'. He searched for the last of them, the one on which for some reason he was the lowest, pink spot, and for a moment he ran his fingers over the figure in the center of the page before pressing the picture to his chest, almost running towards the office.

"Tommy drew this a while ago," he explained, hesitantly setting the piece of paper on the desk. Phil glanced at it at him, and back at the painting, his gaze softening instantly. "I thought you might like-"

He didn't even have time to finish before he found himself in a hug so tight that he almost ran out of breath for a moment. He raised his hands to return the gesture, and Phil rested his chin on top of his head, as he did when Techno was still much, much smaller. And even if he had to crank his neck now and possibly stand on his toes as well, his embrace was still an equally warm place and a promise of absolute safety.

"Thank you," he sighed softly, stepping back and blinking back tears. Eventually he had to wipe it with the back of his hand anyway and smiled apologetically. "God, I've been whining lately, haven't I?" He joked weakly. "I have to pull myself together. Nobody died."

Techno kept the thought to himself that he might as well die. Phil might still believe in miracles, but Tommy wasn't going to come back to them, not as the same child, if not because he found a real home and eventually forgot about them, because his subsequent horrible experiences would confirm that he had stayed there, abandoned by them, and they never really cared for him.

That evening, lying in bed under the thick layer of blankets and listening to the silence of the house, he called Dream.

"Can you tell me something?" He asked, rolling over on his back and setting the phone on the loudspeaker. "Anything, it doesn't matter. I can't sleep."

He couldn't say that hearing about George for two hours would solve his problems in any way. But he felt a little better having finally had any company, and at one point he actually fell asleep, the phone on the pillow and Steve pressed against his chest.

Everyone knew that sooner or later something big was going to happen. The atmosphere in the house grew stronger, each meal together brought more and more tension, the silence grew a little too loud, the words fell too rarely, and you could feel the approaching cataclysm, like an impending storm in the thick summer air. Techno didn't feel ready for it at all. The nightmares became more and more real, it became more and more difficult for him to shake off each of them, he woke up crying more and more, breathing rapidly and with a sob choking in his throat. During the day he tried to stay away from everyone, avoiding confrontation, to postpone the inevitable as far as possible, but from time to time, when he saw the peculiar desperation in Phil's eyes, he would come downstairs to dinner, just to pretend for a moment.

That day, exactly nine days after Tommy had left, Wilbur was definitely not in the mood, even by his new standards. For the third time in a row, he had brought home an intact lunch, and now he was just flipping the food across his plate without even trying to lift the fork to his mouth. He was propping his elbow on the table, his cheek on his hand, and he looked determined to make everyone around him feel awkward and as bad as himself.

Phil endured it patiently for a good ten minutes before finally setting his own cutlery down a little more loudly than was necessary to attract his son's attention.

"Wilbur, you have to eat," he asked more than ordered, and as usual in their new, gloomy reality, a shrug replied.

"I can't." Wilbur pushed his plate away from him, making sure that part of the tablecloth was also slid off with it. Techno gripped his own fork tighter, pretending he couldn't see the world except his potatoes.

Phil frowned, leaning a little bit closer to the table.

"You can't or don't you want to?" He asked, and this time there was a distinct sense of frustration in his voice. He wasn't angry, not really, rather tired and impatient, but it was enough to irritate Wilbur even more, inhaling deeply and straightening up in his chair.

"What's the difference?" He snorted, crossing his arms over his chest. "It doesn't matter what *I* want anyway, does it? Maybe you just decide yourself. Or ask Techno." He grimaced as he glared at his brother. "After all, only his opinion counts."

This time it was impossible to ignore the obvious - Phil had had enough.

"So this is some kind of punishment? Are you going to starve yourself to upset me?" He asked, much sharper than before, which he must have realized only after the fact, because he closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath to calm himself down a little. "Wilbur, please..."

The boy just tilted his head, his gaze cold and sharp.

"I asked you too, *Phil* ." Growled with emphasis, and everyone in the room felt a shiver, both from the tone and the words. Wilbur never called Phil by his first name, not since he first realized that they would be with him forever. "And Tommy asked for something, too."

Sometimes Techno wondered how the strongest man he had ever known could be so easy to break at the same time. Though maybe he just never foresaw that either of them might deliberately use his weaknesses against him.

"Wilbur... I know you're angry, but-"

Wilbur slapped his hands on the table so hard that the glasses shook.

"You don't know *anything* !" He shouted, jumping up from the chair and knocking it over to the floor. "You don't know- You don't know what it's like to think that you will stay somewhere and that someone finally wants you, and then... And then suddenly there's a reason, there's always some good reason! And I always-" He took a deep breath, his voice trembling and his eyes moist. "I always thought you were different."

He gave no one a chance to answer, he just turned and ran upstairs as if he didn't care what he had just done, what damage he left behind, and how much damage he had done with his blast of anger. Techno knew he had no right to blame him for it, not when he had acted this way so many times himself. But he couldn't help that when Phil got up from the table himself, scooped his sweater off the couch, and walked out onto the terrace, letting a blast of cold air into the house, all he thought about was how much he wanted to hit his brother. For his words, for his behavior, for still seeing clearly trembling shoulders and hands clenched on the balcony railing in the falling darkness. For his own helplessness and for not being able to simply *not knowing* how to explain.

He knocked on the door, out of habit, but did not wait for permission to open it as he went inside.

"Phil's crying," he said shortly, standing in the center of the room, determined not to leave until he had completed his case. "Because of you."

Wilbur, curled up in a tight ball on the bed, looked up and for a moment looked genuinely frightened, eyes wide, mouth frozen in mute shock. Then his face tightened, and he frowned as he sat up and crossed his arms.

"Then go cheer him up," he said dryly, in a completely different, strange voice. Everything about him was foreign and Techno had no desire to explore this new, irritating version. "You guys get along so well, don't you?"

Okay, of all the things he expected to hear, this one was definitely not on the list. He blinked, completely confused, but took a step forward to show that he wouldn't give up so easily. And maybe a little, a little, to remind you that he is much stronger and he will not hesitate to use it. Even if he would rather not have to.

"What do you mean?"

Wilbur tried to make up his face, but shuddered and pushed closer to the wall.

"Nothing." He shrugged, looking away. "First you stole my dad, then you stole my brother. Nothing new."

Techno stepped back in amazement.

"I didn't-!" He began, indignant, but the way his brother looked at him, the challenge in his eyes, the silent 'Come on, deny it, argue with me' made him change his mind. He could be just as cynical. He could also pick on anything and make out the smallest mistakes. And he was too furious to hold back from it any longer. "You know what? If you have any problem, why don't you talk to Phil normally instead of making a scene?"

"Oooh, the one who is very mature spoke up!"

"More than you."

Wilbur sprang up from the bed, almost tripping on the blanket. He had grown a lot over the summer and was a few inches taller, but his arms were still slender, his legs lean, and when they stood facing each other, no one would have been under the illusion of who would land on the floor first.

"At least I can admit I'm crazy and go to stupid therapy," he hissed.

Techno clenched his hands into fists.

"And that's good, 'cause you really need it!" He screamed, and in the exact second the words left his throat, he realized what he had just said. He was sure all the blood had drained from his face as he staggered back, gasping for breath. "Fuck." He slid his fingers into his hair, clenching it tightly. "Wilbur, no- I didn't mean to say that, I really..."

His brother didn't look like he was going to listen to him. He didn't look like he was going to say nothing happened, soothe him, then play guitar outside his room.

Techno hated so damn much the thought that he had lost that forever.

"You know how much I care what you wanted and what you didn't?" Wilbur's voice was almost as cold as his gaze. "Remember what dad said? If someone apologizes and then does it again..."

He hung his voice, but didn't have to finish. The unfinished sentence hung in the space between them like a sword pointed straight at his chest. And suddenly it wasn't about Tommy or even Phil anymore, but something about themselves, about betrayed trust and the mutual belief that 'I am the victim in all this'.

Techno shook his head, slowly lowering his hands.

"You knew he wouldn't stay," he tried again, even though he knew it was a lame excuse and he didn't believe it himself. "You knew from the beginning."

"But he could have stayed!" Wilbur took a step forward, jabbing a finger at his chest. "He could have stayed, only you had to- you had to ruin everything, as always!"

Techno didn't respond right away, struggling with the weight building up in his chest, with the rapid heartbeat and hum in his voice making it difficult to think logically. His anger had long since burned out, the flames extinguished, leaving ash scratching his throat and filling his lungs. He could see very little through the tears streaming from his eyes.

"I just want it to finally be calm..."

"And I want my brother back!" Wilbur nudged his shoulder hard enough to make him take a step back.

And maybe it was the result of all the accumulated stress. Maybe despair and fear and the thought of being left somewhere behind, lonely and rejected. Or maybe just the last spurt of adrenaline pulsating in his veins.

He reached to his side, blindly grabbing the first object he could get his hands on.

"Then pack your stuff and get out with him!" He shouted, throwing the cup straight at his brother's chest. "Free way! Nobody will stop you!"

Wilbur staggered, instinctively raising his hands to shield his face, and as the cup hit the ground, he looked down at the wet stain on his sweater and the leftover tea flooding his socks.

And then he jumped on Techno before he even realized it.

They both flew to the ground, struggling and trying to grab each other's hands or deliver a punch, kicking and scratching with such vigor as if they were fighting to survive. Techno could have sworn he was. He could have sworn that he did have to defend himself, he could have sworn a punch to the cheek was a real threat to him, he could have sworn that when he finally knocked his opponent to the ground with his full body weight down, he had a completely unknown stranger in front of him, trying to hurt him like so many before.

He didn't have time to deliver a punch before strong arms grabbed him around the waist and pulled him back, jerking and kicking, digging his fingernails deep into the forearms holding him.

"Stop it right now!" Phil managed to turn at last, facing the wall, and only after the threat was out of sight did Techno sober up enough to at least realize what he was doing. Everything was blurry, everything was too loud, too bright... "Both of you! Now!"

"It's his fault!"

"Wilbur, I don't care who-"

"You never care!" Wilbur's voice came from behind glass, like from the surface when you are deep, deep under the water and can't find your way back. "You never care what I say and

what I want and... And I don't know why you took me when you don't even like me! You could only adopt Techno and you'd be better off without me!"

Phil loosened his grip and Techno sank slowly to the floor, drawing his knees up to his chin and pressing his hands to his ears. He didn't want to be here, he didn't want to be part of it, why couldn't they all just shut up, why couldn't they leave him alone...?

"Wilbur, what are you talking about? Of course I like you. You're my child, how could you even think of-"

"I asked you." The voice sounded different, less confident, and Techno realized his brother was crying. "I asked for him to stay."

Phil exhaled slowly and moved further away, taking the last of his heat with him.

"I know. I know you asked. But I have two sons, Wilbur. And I have to think of both of you."

Wilbur sniffed loudly.

"Bullshit. Techno is always more important. He- He just starts playing the victim and you fly to his aid and do whatever he wants."

"Wilbur, stop it." There was a warning note in Phil's voice, and it was immediately completely ignored.

"No! You know it's true! If I did that, you'd be angry, but Techno can say whatever he wants, and you'll keep comforting him! We all have to put up with his moods because he's too stupid to go to fucking therapy!"

"Wilbur!" This time even Techno shuddered, limping even more. Phil never shouted, never raised his voice at them...

"No! It's all his fault! I don't want to be his brother anymore! I don't want to know him at all! I do not want-!"

"Wilbur, be quiet!"

If Techno has learned anything over the years, it is that sometimes the most inconspicuous things, the most innocent words, could bring back the worst memories. That sometimes it didn't take violence to hurt, to start a whole avalanche that was hard to stop afterwards. That sometimes one single spark is enough to start a fire.

Wilbur sucked in a breath, in the overwhelming silence his breath almost echoed off the walls, trembling and tearful. Everything in Techno shouted that he should help. His first natural instinct was to run to his brother's rescue, but he couldn't move, force himself to get up and do anything, and ultimately it was Phil who broke the silence first.

"I'm sorry." He sounded like he was close to tears himself, and for some reason that only made it worse. "I shouldn't... I'm sorry. Wilbur, please... I'm so sorry."

Techno couldn't listen to it. He didn't want to hear it, he didn't want to be here, at this point he didn't want to exist at all, so he struggled to get up, go out into the corridor, and, leaning against the walls, walk the last few meters to his room. His hands were trembling too much to turn the key in the lock, so after a few tries, when the key hit the floor with a clatter, he just left it and slipped under the covers, pressing into the corner of the bed to feel the wall behind his back. He was sure he couldn't breathe, that he would never be able again, but after a few minutes he finally managed to work out a slightly slower pace, his hands clutching the pillow.

And he just waited, curled up in his dark, silent cocoon. He waited for the voices to stop, waited for the muscles to relax, waited for the irrational fear that he was dying to slowly turn to fatigue and dullness. He waited for the crying and muffled voices to cease from down the hall.

Deep down, he waited for someone to come to comfort him as well.

He must have fallen asleep, tired of crying and stress, because when he leaned his head out from under the blanket again, it was quiet in the house, it was dark in the corridor, and it was almost ten o'clock. He was hot, in jeans and a heavy sweater, his hair falling over his forehead in disarray, and he was torn between sleepiness and the certainty that he would never sleep again for the next five years. He dragged himself out of bed, forcing his stiff muscles to work, and pushed the door ajar, tilting his head over the doorframe. He tiptoed down the corridor, toward the light falling down the stairs, and just as quietly descended to the living room illuminated by the glow of the lamp.

Phil sat on the couch, Wilbur cuddled against his side, and he immediately turned his head, smiling at the sight of his second child. He was clearly tired, but it was hard to expect anything else, it also seemed that the biggest crisis had already been dealt with, so Techno stepped closer, confidently grabbing his extended hand and letting him pull himself under the blanket. He rested his head on the arm around him, turning so that he could see his brother, even though his red eyes and his still puffy face from crying weren't a pleasant sight.

"Wilbur-" he began, but fell silent instantly, silenced with one sharp shake of Wilbur's head.

"I don't want to talk about it." Wilbur's voice was harsh and hoarse, but there was no trace of any previous anger. Only terrifying, unspeakable sadness. "Not yet."

He closed his eyes without even looking at his brother, and even though Techno knew he deserved it, it was the best he could count on right now, he felt a little hurt. He wasn't going to complain, however, letting the room go quiet again, letting the closeness to one another give them a safety they couldn't say, letting the sleepiness return slowly, and the thought of bathing and changing clothes would drift away.

"Boys?" Phil shifted slightly, probably making sure they were awake. Techno looked up immediately, but Wilbur just opened his eyes, stifling a yawn. Phil looked first at one, then at the other, and smiled fondly. "I love you both more than you can imagine. The most in the

world and no matter what." He hugged them a little tighter, pressing them against his sides. "I'm sorry I forgot to remind you of this."

Wilbur still didn't show much of any emotion, so Techno was the first to respond, though he suspected he had a much less right to do so at the moment.

"It's all right," he said with a shrug. "You were tired."

Phil, naturally, grimaced immediately and shook his head.

"I'm never too tired to-"

"Bullshit," Wilbur snapped suddenly, straightening up so abruptly that the blanket fell off his shoulders. His voice was still hoarse, and maybe that was why it sounded a lot harsher than usual. "You always want us to tell you when something is wrong, but you always lie yourself that everything is fine."

Phil blinked in complete surprise.

"I'm not lying at all-"

"You're lying." Techno interrupted him this time. He might not be the one who deserved an apology, but he also had his say on that. "You say you're not tired, or that you have time or that you- that you're not hurt, when you are." He pursed his lips for a moment, glancing down at his hands clutching the blanket. "Sometimes I wish you'd just say you're angry, so I can apologize properly."

Wilbur nodded.

"We're not little anymore. We understand that sometimes you get a little fed up with us." He threw up his arms. "We can't stand you too, sometimes."

Phil leaned his back a little harder against the couch, tilting his head back, and for a moment said nothing, sitting in silence with half-closed eyes.

"I'm quite a hypocrite, right?" He sighed at last, raising his hands to be able to stroke both sons on the heads. Then he ruffled their hair just as unexpectedly, causing a double murmur of discontent. "How lucky I have someone to tell me about it!"

Techno rolled his eyes, but his heart felt a little lighter as he saw Wilbur smile, a little pale and fleetingly, but certainly sincere, for the first time in days.

"Always at your service," he snorted, then yawned widely and pulled the blanket tighter over his shoulders. "Can we not go to school tomorrow?"

Phil exhaled slowly, hesitating for a moment, but finally nodded.

"I think a day off will do us good," he admitted, and Techno held his breath, fearing Wilbur would deny it, saying that he didn't include his brother in his plans at all. But it didn't happen,

so he finally relaxed and allowed himself to focus on the good things, pushing aside the thought that somewhere, far away, there was a little boy who might still be missing them.

Chapter End Notes

Techno: Wilbur will hate me.

Wilbur: *hates him*

Techno: *shocked pikachu*

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Short chapter to break your hearts :)

Chapter Notes

I made it with @Katricia! :D

They spent most of the next morning in the kitchen. Surprisingly, without the vision of the school hanging overhead, they were both up in the pale dawn, disheveled, in pajamas, ready to demand the full attention of a still sleepy Phil. Breakfast, consumed in a hurry on the couch in front of the TV, only gave them energy, so even though it was only eight o'clock, they searched the Internet for a cake recipe and went about making a mess. It was starting to rain outside, the whole world looked foggy and gray, and they still hadn't spoken to each other apart from individual remarks, but the atmosphere was much better than it had been in the days before, so Techno wasn't going to complain. Even if he got hit in the face with too much flour a few too many times for it to be considered an accident.

Phil was in the process of trying to convince them that "add the chocolate" does not mean "go ahead until the bowl is full" when a muffled, familiar melody rang down from somewhere upstairs.

"Techno." Phil, busy keeping the cake out of Wilbur's reach, looked up at him pleadingly. "Could you?"

Techno sighed dramatically, completely uninterested in leaving the kitchen, but obediently wiped his hands on his brother's back, dodged quickly from a well-deserved blow, and trudged up the stairs, making sure he stomped hard enough. He found Phil's cell phone in the corridor and picked up quickly, knowing the bell was slowly reaching its end. He opened his mouth to recite the formula that he was about to ask Phil on the phone, but he didn't have time to say anything when a squeaky childish voice echoed in the earpiece.

"Phil! Phil, Phil, *Phil!*"

Techno froze, mouth still open, clenching his fingers a little tighter. For a moment he was sure he had misheard, or was finally going crazy, but the yelling continued, growing desperate and louder, until the child paused for a second to take a breath, and it was this moment of silence that finally woke him from his shock.

"Tommy?" He gasped, though he didn't need any additional confirmation.

On the other side, the boy inhaled loudly.

"Techno!" He sounded bad, as if he'd just been crying, sniffing every now and then, and his voice trembling with every other word, but he clearly breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that he wasn't alone after all. "Techno, I don't want to be here! Tell Phil he has to come pick me up, Techno, *he has to!*"

Techno frowned, trying to remain calm, even as the panic was slowly beginning to infect him as well.

"What happened?" He asked, against all reason, against all his knowledge, praying silently that it was about something stupid, about ordinary childish anger, because someone forbade him to watch TV or eat only sweets, which would be cruel and terribly unfair.

Tommy sniffed again, and there was no doubt now that he was starting to cry again.

"Because... Because they're not nice at all," he sobbed, gasping for air in large gulps. "And they're yelling at me. And I told them I didn't like them doing that because Phil said I should tell if I didn't like something. But they still screamed and said I was 'ungrateful' which is not true at all because I said my room was very nice and I like it but then they were angry that I made a mess in it and wouldn't let me leave until I cleaned it up and they closed the door and it wasn't cool at all and I was scared! And they said it was my fault, because if I had been good, they wouldn't have done it. And Phil has to come here because I don't like them at all! I want to go back home! Techno, please, *please...*!"

Techno, still motionless, listening to the tearful stream of words with mounting terror, found himself nodding his head even if no one could see it.

"Wait- I'll call Phil," he stammered finally, despite his lump in his throat. "Wait a second."

Tommy said something else, but Techno barely registered the buzzing noise on the phone as his legs shook as he turned towards the stairs. He had almost grabbed the railing when he suddenly froze motionless and just stared at his feet for a moment, while the first shock wave passed, his own thoughts echoing in the place of panic.

He wasn't stupid or naive, and he knew Phil too well to be unable to predict how the story would end. He will get in the car and rush to the rescue of the child, not even knowing the address, before he even listens to the story to the end and hears anything more than 'please come'. Tommy will be back. And this time he will stay forever. Their family might have survived one breakup, and there was no force enough to make them do it again, and even if there was, Techno didn't have that much power. Besides, he doubted that anyone would ask him for his opinion.

Tommy was going to be back, now, when things were slowly finally start to fall into place. Now that Wilbur had started talking to him again, now that Phil was only there for them again. Now that, for the first time in weeks, Techno felt safe and secure in his position.

Tommy was going to come back and be all that Techno couldn't be again. A cheerful, charming child who still knows how to be happy, a little boy who can still trust, who clings to people, who wants to be loved and asks for it in the simplest, most heartbreaking way. He would laugh and joke and never get angry when Wilbur played his guitar, never say things that made others cry, never shout or throw things. He would fit perfectly on Phil's shoulders and be able to make the whole house so much his own and then grow into someone who doesn't wake up screaming at night, who doesn't cut his hair in a fit of panic, who can just not listen to voices repeating bad things over and over again.

Tommy was going to come back. And Techno was supposed to allow it and watch how his family slowly ceases to be his, how he becomes less and less needed, how his place is taken by someone new, someone better. And then one day, Phil would look him straight in the eye and say he should pack before Nate comes to pick him up.

It wasn't the first time. He should be used to it. Phil deserved better than he was. He deserved a child who would like to cuddle, who would know how to laugh, who in a few weeks, maybe months, would forget everything that had happened to him. He deserved a child who would call him 'dad' without hesitation.

If Techno were really a good person, he would be able to give it to him. And he could smile, knowing he'd done the right thing, no matter how goddamn it hurt.

But Techno didn't want to be a good person.

He wanted to be happy. He wanted to be safe. He wanted to be loved.

He wanted to stay with his family, even if it meant becoming the worst of the worst and hurting anyone who stood in his way.

Slowly, on stiff legs, barely feeling the floor beneath his feet, he stepped back down the hall and lifted the receiver to his ear. He listened to the kid's shallow breathing and thought that perhaps he would never get a chance to apologize for what he was about to do.

"Phil doesn't want to talk to you."

Tommy didn't speak immediately, just held his breath.

"What...?" He stammered out after a moment, so desperately that Techno winced. Everything about him screamed with sympathy, because he knew this pain, he knew this despair and helplessness, but he couldn't, he simply couldn't answer it.

"He said he was busy," he continued, trying to keep his voice neutral enough. "I asked if I should tell you something, but he had nothing to say to you." He shrugged, even if no one could see it. "I'm sorry."

For a long moment, all he could hear was rapid breathing in the earpiece.

"But..." The child's voice broke down into open crying. "But he said I can always call! And that he will always help me if I need to! And I need it very much! *Very!* And-!"

"Tommy," he interjected, and the boy fell silent immediately, probably hoping for a little understanding at last. "Phil said that to stop you from crying. It's just something adults say that doesn't really matter."

The lie seemed to burn his throat alive with fire, the weight of the guilt on his shoulders was doubling for each word, but he only closed his eyes, gathering himself to go on.

"But... But Phil-!"

"Phil was nice because he had to look after you. It's his job, Tommy. They pay him for it. Now you're no longer his problem."

"But-!"

"Tommy." He paused again, a lot sharper this time. "I'll give you some good advice. Stop relying on others and learn to take care of yourself. You can only trust yourself." He lowered his voice involuntarily to a whisper, catching himself speaking with sincere concern for the first time. "Do you remember the story I told you? And its ending? You don't want to end up the same, do you?" He took his cell phone away from his ear, staring at the screen for a moment. "Take care of yourself, Theseus."

The screen trembled as he broke the call, removed it from history and blocked the number to get rid of all traces.

He was safe. For the first time in weeks, he was finally safe.

And he felt terrible knowing that he didn't deserve it at all.

* * *

He couldn't concentrate for the rest of the day.

When he returned to the kitchen, where Wilbur had already convinced Phil that the recipe was just a suggestion, it felt as if someone had dropped him into the icy water. The calm, family atmosphere didn't match the chaos in his head, the remorse consuming him from the inside, the fear that he had left some trace that someone would find out, that Tommy would find some other way to contact them and he would repeat everything that he heard from him.

Phil had to nudge his shoulder to get his attention at all, and he jumped back as if burnt before turning back to reality.

"Hey, take it easy, kiddo!" Phil held up his hands, smiling apologetically. "I was just asking who was calling."

It took Techno a few seconds to calm down and repeat in his mind that everything was fine, no one suspected anything and all he had to do was act naturally.

"Nobody important," he muttered, shrugging his shoulders and, seeing the questioning gaze, added, "Unless you're considering changing your religion."

Phil grimaced slightly, but Wilbur leaned over the counter, keenly interested.

"I'm considering!" He announced, surreptitiously adding more chocolate to the cake. He probably planned to give them all diabetes, tooth decay, and a few other diseases in a package.

"Oh." Phil raised an eyebrow at him in surprise, clearly unsure whether he should take it seriously or as an introduction to another joke. "Really?"

"Yes." Wilbur nodded seriously. "I think it would be very fun to start my own church. And I would get donations!"

Ah. So everything was normal after all.

Techno tried with all his might to stick to reality, participate in the conversation and joke with everything. He tried to laugh at the right moments and not panic every time someone raised his voice or touched him without warning, which he wouldn't even hear over the rising buzzing in his head. It was getting harder and harder for him to breathe, his chest was burning, and he found himself remembering absolutely nothing from the movie they watched together, sitting on the couch and picking at the cake from the plates, that turned out to be too thin, too sweet, but also too good to throw away. In fact, he didn't even move, after the first track he just froze with dirty fingers over the plate, unable to stop thinking that maybe Tommy wasn't so lucky at the moment. Maybe he's hungry and scared and all alone, convinced that the only person he really trusted never really cared about him. Maybe he's trying to call again, maybe someone caught him with the phone and hurt him, maybe he's locked in his room right now, crying... He hoped at least he still had Henry with him.

"You're very quiet today," Phil remarked at lunch, staring down at the potatoes Techno spread over the plate with a fork without even trying to swallow anything. "Something happened? Are you feeling bad?"

He reached out, touching his forehead, but the boy immediately pulled away, pushing his hand away.

"I'm fine," he said, trying to put a little more energy into it. "I'm just having a bad day, that's all."

"Oh." The hand backed away, but now Phil looked at him in that sad, caring way of his that was absolutely unbearable when there was a child somewhere far away who really needed it, and was never going to get it. "You wanna talk about it?"

He shook his head, rising quickly from the table before anyone thought of questioning him further. There were only a certain number of questions that were easy to bear and not break

under pressure. Even though he knew it was absurd, he couldn't help feeling that everyone around him knew, that they knew everything he'd done right from the start, and now they're just waiting for him to finally confess and pass judgment on himself. He saw it with every look, with every gesture, including the way Wilbur frowned at him, the way Phil watched him go as he ran upstairs muttering that he had a headache and would lie down early. It wasn't even dark outside yet, but he didn't care a bit about that.

As he changed in the bathroom something small fell out of his pocket and rolled across the floor. He bent down and picked up a pebble, then rubbed it against his blouse and lifted it into the light, watching it cast pale reflections on the walls.

He didn't want to remember he liked Tommy at all. He didn't want to remember anything about him.

He didn't want to remember what he had done to him.

But he didn't deserve to forget.

He stood in the shower a lot longer than usual, as if the water might somehow wash away his guilt and let him regain his sane mind. He felt a little better, warmed up and a little more relaxed, but as soon as he covered the window in the room and slipped under the covers, all fears and thoughts returned with redoubled force, even louder in the silence. He cringed, his fingers gripping his hair tight, but it didn't do much, so he tried to focus on anything, mentally counting as Phil had taught him.

He reached one hundred and forty-five when he heard a knock on the door. He looked up slowly, torn between the urge to pretend he didn't exist and the desperate need to reach for whatever support the world offered him, but he didn't even have to make a decision, because Wilbur made it for him by sticking his head in and squinting in the dim light.

"Hey," he whispered, stepping a little closer but still keeping one hand on the doorknob. "You feel better?"

Techno wanted to answer honestly. He wanted to lie even more and assure him that everything was alright, that it would be alright, he had to be, because he wouldn't be able to endure a single day more of this heavy atmosphere, dead silence and unspoken grievances. He wanted to smile and pretend that he didn't hold a grudge, that he really understood, that he could just forget all the bad moments and enjoy a new beginning.

Instead, he just looked his brother in the eye and frowned, feeling his chest tighten and his frustration building up.

"I thought you weren't talking to me."

Wilbur was clearly confused, which would normally have been a good sign, but now it only made the situation even more awkward. He swayed on his heels, biting his lip as he scanned the walls of the room before he finally took a deep breath and looked at his brother with a sudden rush of determination.

"I'm sorry." It sounded more like he was trying to sign a non-aggression pact, but maybe they were actually at that point at the moment. "For what I said yesterday."

Techno winced at the bitter taste in his mouth.

"What exactly?"

Wilbur's arms lowered slowly in a helpless gesture, one of those that always made everyone immediately want to run to his rescue. His face softened, his eyes moistened, and he suddenly looked like a stupid little brother who was getting into trouble and had to be watched over every step of the way.

"There was a lot of it, wasn't it?" He smiled faintly, and his lips trembled slightly. "I'm really sorry."

And even though Techno was still angry with him, even if he still didn't understand, even though the last weeks he'd spent alone feeling pushed away by everyone were still between them, and the words still hurt, he knew he'd already lost. He had lost to that sad look and helplessness and to his own instinct that told him to do anything to protect this utter idiot, even from himself.

He shifted closer to the wall, patting the mattress beside him, rolling his eyes as Wilbur, without second thought, ran up and jumped onto the bed, plunging under the thick layer of blankets.

"Okay," he sighed, and this time, even if it wasn't entirely true, he really meant it. "You were mostly right."

Wilbur immediately shook his head.

"Not at all. I was just angry because..." He hesitated and looked away. He didn't have to finish. They both knew, even if they were still not ready to say it out loud. "And I said it because I knew it would hurt you. That you say bad things sometimes on your days are bad and... And everything." He grimaced guiltily. "And I guess I was more jealous than I thought."

Techno hummed understandingly, uncertainly, a little as a test, rubbing the back of his hand.

"But you know Phil doesn't like you any less, don't you?"

Wilbur looked down at their hands beside him, then leaned forward, resting his temple on his brother's shoulder, pressed against his side.

"I talked to him about it. I wish I had done it sooner, maybe... Maybe things would be different." He looked up at him, frowning. "You know I like you too, don't you? Even if you're annoying."

Even after thinking about it for the next ten years, Techno wouldn't be able to describe the relief he felt at that moment.

"Really?" He made sure, quietly and a little hesitantly, and Wilbur immediately smiled as broadly as possible.

"Yhm. You're my twin, aren't you?" He elbowed him in the side. "We're stuck with each other. Just..." He paused for a moment, becoming more serious. "Give me some time, okay?"

Techno was ready to give him even all eternity, as long as he could still have him.

He was just opening his mouth to say it in some very, very hidden way when quick steps flew from the corridor, and after a while the door swung open, letting in a blinding light. They both grimaced, squinting at such a brutal blinding attempt, but as soon as they got used to the brightness a bit, they exchanged concerned glances.

Phil stood on the doorstep, pale and visibly flustered, clutching the cell phone so tightly in his hand that there was a serious risk that the equipment might not come out of it in one piece.

"Tommy's gone," he said, and that was enough for the world to stop for a moment. "He ran away from home."

Techno was absolutely sure his heart stopped too.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Yooo! @Katricia helped me traumatized y'all!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Another week passed before any of them even noticed that it had started. Techno and Wilbur spent the morning and far too much of the afternoon at school, struggling to register whatever was going on around them, shuffling their feet under their desks and surreptitiously checking their phones before a teacher finally confiscated them. As soon as the last bell rang, they rushed to the exit, where Phil was waiting for them, tapping his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel and watching in the side mirror as they tossed their backpacks in.

"Belts," he reminded every time, whether or not they actually forgot, mostly to say something. The rest of the journey was usually in complete silence.

They ate sandwiches brought from home, washed down with tea from thermos flasks, staring at the view outside the window, fields, forests and cities that had become a natural sight in the last few days. Wilbur could recite all the town names in the right order from memory, Techno only remembered that two big blue houses in a row meant they were close to their destination.

It was cold and rainy, the suburban sandy roads got soggy, the fallen leaves formed a thick, slippery layer, from which even the best shoes were wet after a few hours of hiking, but no one complained about water in socks, or damp trouser legs, or even on cold evenings when the breaths turned to steam and they had to put on extra sweaters to keep from freezing. All three had a runny nose, and Techno was absolutely sure Phil was about to overdose on aspirin, but he made no comment about it.

They took the less traveled roads, staggering farther and farther from 'Tommy's new house' each day, and even though neither of them spoke aloud as they scoured the park or passed old flashing street lamps, the weight of time grew heavier with each passing hour, harder to ignore. Temperatures at night began to drop more and more, a small child had a greater and greater chance of hypothermia or pneumonia, especially if he didn't find good shelter.

Techno was sure he could survive it. He knew more than he wanted about running away from home, he knew what to look for and how to get everything he needed. But Tommy wasn't him. Tommy took his small backpack, two pairs of socks, a jacket and sneakers from the house, and stole a few granola bars from the kitchen - definitely not enough to even survive in summer, let alone with the specter of winter on the horizon.

Phil never mentioned it. He didn't say that there was a very good chance that a trusting and naive child would have trusted the wrong person and they might never find him again. He didn't say that if Tommy tried to cross the forest, he might lose his way in the ever earlier evening. He didn't say that everyone around him was looking less and less for a child, and more and more for answers about what happened to him.

"The police always say if you don't find someone in seventy-two hours, they're probably dead," Wilbur said on the fourth day, pulling his knees high under the chin in the backseat as they returned from another fruitless search.

In the pale light of the torch beside him, Techno was able to see Phil's face tighten, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly.

"Fortunately, I'm not a cop," he replied sharply, with such firmness that no one would dare to argue with him. "And I don't give up so easily."

He himself contacted the police regularly though, mostly to say that they still hadn't found anything and to hear the same in return. Phil looked worse after each call and usually walked out onto the terrace, staring out into the garden as if hoping that somehow Tommy would just pop out from behind the bushes and run over to hug him and tell him about everything that had happened in the last few days.

Techno couldn't look at him like this. Not when he knew that their home was the last place Tommy would now seek help. And it was his fault.

"Maybe he'll try to go to Tubbo?" Wilbur suggested as they walked down the muddy alleys, hoods pulled up to their foreheads.

Phil leaned out to peer down one of the most dingy alleys, scanning every nook and cranny.

"Sam has already contacted Tubbo's parents," he replied, backing away in disappointment. "They know the situation and are sensitive to the fact that Tubbo may try to hide someone under the bed or in the closet."

"What about Tommy's mother?" Techno interjected, shaking his flashlight as it began to blink alarmingly. Phil took it from him and slapped it with an open palm, and the light instantly flashed like new.

"Hard to say she helps," he grimaced, "but she'll certainly let us know if Tommy gets to her. She definitely won't try to hide it."

It was not entirely good news, and everyone was aware of it. It would be much better to assume that Tommy was safe, that he was in the hands of someone who might not be the perfect guardian, but at least would make sure he didn't spend the next night outside.

Techno hated these thoughts. He hated being in bed at night, knowing Tommy was out there somewhere, cold and hungry and scared... if he was still alive at all. He hated the fear that he might never see him again, and the feeling of guilt that made him cry for hours, hiding his face in the pillow.

Because he hadn't done anything when he should have helped. Because he heard a tearful plea in the receiver and lied without a trace of sympathy, depriving the boy of his only hope of salvation. Because he was just as deaf, just as blind, just as insensitive as all the people who were supposed to take care of him and had failed. Because he has done more harm than the entire system has ever done to him.

So he tightened his grip on the flashlight and shook his head as Phil asked if he wanted to go home, even if he was cold and tired and struggling to take his next steps. The only thing left for him is to turn his guilt into determination and fix at least some of his mistakes so that someday he can look himself in the eye again.

* * *

On Saturday, it wasn't raining for the first time in a week. Techno was relieved, because even though dressing in five layers of clothes at seven in the morning was not pleasant regardless of the weather, it was nice not to get wet at the start. He was devouring sandwiches, despite his lack of appetite, struggling to get energy for at least a few hours of searching, when Wilbur appeared in the kitchen, dressed but still visibly sleepy, with his hair not fully combed.

"I can't find my sweater," he complained, scowling at his brother as if he thought he was hiding the missing item in his pocket. "The new yellow one."

Techno shrugged as he offered him a plate of sandwiches.

"It must be where my pants, two blankets and a pillow are," he muttered harshly, because while he never felt sorry for his clothes, he liked to have something to cover up at night.

Wilbur puffed his cheeks as he crossed arms over his chest.

"I didn't take them!" He was indignant, to which a look of disbelief answered him.

"Sure, they grew their own legs and ran away."

"Boys." Phil, standing by the door to the terrace with coffee in hand, now turned, putting the mug in the sink. "Finish eating and we go, okay?" He looked first at one, then at the other, his face softening immediately. "Are you sure you don't want to stay home? You need some rest."

Techno was shaking his head even before he heard the end of the sentence.

"No," he replied firmly, and Wilbur immediately backed him up.

"Rest is for the weak." He straightened proudly. "We can search all day."

Phil sighed, reaching out to ruffle his hair.

"Okay," he agreed, and even if he didn't say it aloud, there was a distinct hint of pride in his eyes. "Then eat and go!"

He was much less proud half an hour later when they had passed the first two intersections, and Wilbur suddenly straightened up, patted all his pockets, and looked exactly the same as he always did when he realized in class that he had left his homework on his desk.

"I didn't pick up my phone..." he said softly, slipping a little lower in the seat and tucking his shoulders into his arms as Phil looked at him in the rearview mirror. "I left it on the table."

Techno was eager to reach out and slap him right on the back of the head, but he limited himself to a low hum of dissatisfaction.

"And then you're surprised you can't find anything," he grunted, poking his brother in the ankle.

Phil just sighed heavily, closed his eyes for a moment, and pulled down a side street to turn around.

"I was supposed to take some more water anyway," he said, probably to cheer his son up, when he looked sad, mumbling 'I'm sorry...'.

They pulled into the driveway and Techno immediately unbuckled his seat belt, preferring to mess with his brother while looking for a cell phone than to sit quietly in the car with his own thoughts. The voices were the worst company he had had in his entire life, and the competition was weak.

"If anyone needs a bathroom, last chance!" Phil opened the door wide, not bothering wiping his shoes, but as soon as they passed the hall he stopped so abruptly that Wilbur bumped his nose into his back. Techno, a bit ahead, leaned over to see what was causing the traffic jam, and immediately felt his heart leap into his throat. In the middle of the living room, with a blanket draped over his shoulders, an oversized yellow sweater that fell down to the knees, and his pants rolled up three times and pulled tight with a belt - was Tommy. His face was dirty, his hair disheveled, at least three pairs of socks on his feet, each of which had probably already hardened to stone from the grime, and he held an armful of apples in his arms, one of which was still held in his teeth as he stood motionless, with open eyes, like a deer caught in the headlights of a car.

There was already a glass and a bottle of juice on the table, a paper and crayons scattered next to it, and Techno suddenly realized that he was not hallucinating or going crazy. Tommy was really here, he was at their house, he ate their food and he drew more colorful spots as if nothing had happened.

"Tommy." Phil was the first to wake up enough to recover his voice. And it sounded as if his soul changed its mind at the last moment and decided to stay in the body after all.

The kid blinked, slowly lowered his head to put the apple back in the pile, biting off a large chunk before swallowing and wiping his mouth on his shoulder.

"Hey there." He said, stepping nervously from foot to foot. "How are you?"

Phil looked like he was going to cry at any moment.

"Tommy, what are you doing here?"

The child curled up his arms, taking a step back. He was like a puppy that tries to pretend to be threatening, but at the same time it tucks its tail and picks up its ears.

"Nothing special. How are you?"

Techno was beginning to seriously wonder whether the whole situation was one big, very absurd dream. Especially since when Phil finally shook off his shock and took a step towards the boy, reaching out to him, he immediately jumped back as if burned.

"You are a bitch!" He screamed, throwing one of the apples that missed the main target, but it hit Wilbur in the shoulder. The rest hit the floor and rolled in all directions as the child ran across the room, hit the basement door, and before anyone could follow him, it had slammed shut behind him.

It hadn't been closed for more than a few seconds. Phil grabbed the doorknob first, but Wilbur slipped under his arm and ran down the stairs, hopping long steps and nearly stumbling on the last one. Techno ended the chase, still stunned, bursting with adrenaline and almost unknowingly imitating the others. The railing of the stairs gave a slight bend as he pressed harder against it, the old wood creaked softly, but besides the rapid breathing and the echoing steps against the bare walls, there was complete silence in the basement. Cold air blew in through the open window, slightly swaying the white sheets thrown over the nearest furniture, there was coolness from the stone floor, and the only bulb illuminating the room flashed with pale light. Everything looked exactly like a few weeks ago, and Techno felt a rush of irrational fear that they had somehow lost the child a second time, even though there was no way it would have been able to climb up to the window and squeeze through it into the garden.

Then he heard a sneeze. And the second one, much louder, ended with a snort.

All three immediately turned their heads to the left, toward the narrow space beneath the stairs where there was a large table that used to take up almost half of the dining room. Phil frowned and stepped closer, pulling off the white cover in one motion, blowing dust into the air and causing another series of sneezes.

Tommy huddled a bit more in his hideout, hurriedly wiping his nose on his sleeve (Techno would bet Wilbur would murder him in the future for this). He slipped deeper, between the blankets and pillows stacked on the floor, packets of cookies, crisps, and bottles of water and juice that had mysteriously disappeared from the kitchen in recent days.

"Get out of my room!" He exclaimed, probably trying to sound scary, but his voice was breaking and he definitely didn't look dangerous, crouching like a raccoon amidst his precious mountain of loot.

Phil took a lot of breath and held it for a moment, trying to calm down.

"Tommy, why are you in my basement?" He asked, and the child immediately bristled even more.

"It's my room!" He insisted, straightening, but he misjudged the distance, hit the table top and then bowed his head, rubbing his hand over the sore spot. "You have a big house, you can share!"

"Tommy, it's not that I don't want to share, it's just-" Phil trailed off, probably realizing the conversation was going in the wrong direction. He frowned and slowly sat down on the floor, his hands in his lap, probably to show he had no evil intentions. "Tommy, you ran away from home."

The boy puffed up his cheeks, resting his chin on his knees.

"Because they were mean to me!" He snapped. "And they locked me in a room and yelled, and if I have to have a family like that, I prefer to live alone!" He nodded, admitting to himself that he was right. "Yes! I will live alone and I can manage on my own and I don't need anyone at all! I'll raise myself, yes!"

Phil raised his eyebrows.

"In my basement?" He said teasingly, surreptitiously gesturing to Wilbur not to try to come any closer. He obediently backed away, but continued tapping his foot nervously, clearly eager to intervene.

Meanwhile, Tommy scowled, thought about something, and finally nodded his head.

"This will be our basement," he decided generously, like a gentleman graciously giving the peasant his own land. "You can still use it."

Phil's mouth twitched slightly, though he was still tense and looked disturbingly close to a heart attack.

"Ah. Thank you very much." He stood up slowly and walked closer, kneeling down in front of the table. Tommy didn't move, just watching his movements vigilantly and closing his eyes as a hand brushed his hair from his forehead, then tugged the biggest dirt off his cheek. "But maybe we can talk about it upstairs, how about that?"

The boy hesitated, but he reached out hesitantly, letting Phil embrace him and drag him out of his den.

"And you won't call Sam?" He made sure, putting his legs back and leaning back to wait for the answer.

Phil hesitated, but since he was himself and always had to tell the truth, he finally shook his head.

"Tommy," he began calmly, tightening his grip as the kid tried to pull away. "You need to know where- Ouch!" He withdrew his hand sharply, staring indignantly at the deep red marks in his teeth. "Tommy!"

The child's jaws snapped for millimeters of air from his fingers, but somehow Phil managed to avoid a close encounter with them this time. But he reasonably decided not to risk it and let Tommy crawl back into his little dump, making a hollow growl. Apparently, the week of living "feral" affected him more than one might imagine.

"No! If you call him, they'll pick me up again! And I'm fine now!"

"Like fuck you're fine!" Wilbur finally couldn't stand it and stepped forward, past Phil and reaching under the table. He somehow managed to avoid being bitten, and although the kid's nails made his forearm a scratching post, he grabbed the child by the collar and dragged him across the floor to the center of the basement. "You scared us to death! And you stole my sweater, you gremlin!!"

Tommy, still kicking in all directions, finally managed to slide out from behind the large clothes, but still clung to them like the most valuable thing in the world.

"Because I was cold!" He tugged hard, probably not expecting Wilbur to reply the same.

"And you got snot on them!" Wilbur gave another tug, but the only effect was that Tommy scowled at him, took a lot of air, and deliberately wiped his nose right in the middle of the yellow sleeve. "You little-!"

"Wilbur." Phil finally decided to intervene and grabbed his son by the wrist. They stared into each other's eyes for a moment, having a silent, very intense discussion, before Wilbur finally released his grip and stepped back, crossing his arms and turning his head. The child immediately took advantage of this to press his sweater victoriously to his chest and stick out his tongue, but then he curled up his shoulders, feeling stern eyesight on him. "Tommy, how did you even get in here?"

The boy hesitated, clearly calculating if he should reveal his secret, but finally pointed his finger at the far wall.

"Through the window."

Phil looked in the direction indicated and winced slightly.

"For once, my laziness has some good sides," he muttered under his breath, before he crouched down again to catch the child's height. "But how did you get here? To our house."

This time, Tommy just shrugged as if he thought this particular part of the adventure was the least interesting.

"By train," he announced as if nothing had happened, then added, "Wilbur showed me how."

Everyone immediately looked at the older boy, who immediately stopped taking offense and made an almost comically frightened face.

"I didn't!" He squeaked defensively. "I just showed him on the map that it wasn't that far away and that I could visit him. Nothing more!"

Tommy glared at him resentfully.

"But you didn't visit me," he observed bitterly. "Nobody visited me."

As dramatic as it might sound, and how much Wilbur surely wanted to protest (because, in fact, he had asked for it several times, and every time he heard that they should give Tommy time to get used to the new family first), he didn't have time to do so, because Phil took off his jacket, throwing it over the shaking shoulders of the boy standing in the t-shirt, and looked him intently in the eyes.

"How did you get the ticket?" He asked, starting to brush his hair back behind his ears, as if he was stroking a wild cat to calm it down. "Nobody asked about anything?"

Tommy rocked on his heels, taking a deep breath as if he was preparing for his life story.

"They asked if I was going alone, so I said no, of course not, I'm six, how am I going to go alone? And I pointed to some guy a bit away and said 'my dad said I was big now and I could buy the ticket myself! And then nobody asked about anything. And then I got a little lost and slept in an empty house once, but it was freezing cold so I tried to find my way and finally it worked. And at first I thought I could hide in your shed, but I found a window. And then I heard you guys were leaving and I was hungry so I went out to get something to eat. And at first I was just hiding, but then I found out that you were going out every day for a long time and it's warm upstairs, so I started to hide only when you came back. And I took some more stuff, but it's not stealing because I didn't take anything out of the house, right? So it doesn't count. And I don't eat much at all, so you can share a bit," he concluded, lifting his chin as if he was just waiting for someone to argue with this fact.

Phil was certainly not going to, judging from the way he rubbed the corners of his eyes and sighed very, very hard.

"I don't know if I should be proud or scared of you," he said, shaking his head, but with the naked eye you could see that most of all he was damn happy to have the boy in front of him, safe and healthy and snotty in someone else's sweaters. "We were looking for you everywhere, and you were sitting in our basement." He shook his head, smiling incredulously, then pulled the boy close to him, hugging him tightly, with such longing and desperation as if he expected never to have the opportunity to do so again. "You have no idea how badly you scared me, kiddo."

Tommy didn't return the hug. He allowed himself to be held, but remained completely passive and only wrinkled his nose, wincing as if someone had slipped something particularly gross in his face.

"And what are you lying for?" He asked wryly. "Why were you looking for me when you don't care anyway?"

Techno felt that he was suddenly very hot. When the first shock and great, sky-high relief subsided, he immediately squeezed into the farthest corner and tried to merge with the wall, tense and waiting for the worst. Which, apparently, was about to happen.

He took a hesitant step towards the stairs while Phil tried to understand why he was suddenly considered the greatest traitor in world history.

"Tommy, of course I care," he said slowly, carefully accentuating each word. He tried to hug the boy again, but he jumped away, wrapping his jacket tightly around him like a shield. "You can't even imagine how much."

"Bullshit!" Tommy stamped his foot, and his eyes flashed, part anger, part rising tears. "If you cared, you would have come for me and helped me, and I wouldn't have to sit here."

It was definitely not something he should have said. Even without it, Phil tended to blame himself for all the evil in the world, especially one with which he had nothing to do with. Pointing out anything to him was in fact fueling an eternal wheel of remorse, mostly undeserved, and in a different situation, Techno would want to kick the kid hard.

Unfortunately, he was temporarily busy struggling to breathe and trying to calm his heart beating so fast and loud that he wondered how others might not hear it.

As predicted, Phil instantly saddened and grimaced with guilt.

"I had no idea anything was wrong. You were supposed to call me, remember? If only something bad happened, you had-"

"I called you!" Tommy was so indignant that he hadn't even noticed that his sweater had slipped from his hands. "I called and you didn't want to talk to me! Because they didn't pay you for it anymore, so you didn't care anymore and you could stop being nice and-" His voice trembled and the first tears glistened in the corners of his eyes. "And pretend you're better than my mom!"

Phil looked torn between trying to calm him down and finding out the facts.

"Tommy, what are you talking about?" He asked finally, frowning. "When did I not want to talk to you?"

Techno took another step towards the stairs. His hands were so sweaty that if he tried to grab the railing, it would most likely slip out from under his fingers.

Tommy's cheeks were already wet. He wiped it with his hand hastily, but the tears only smeared the dirt and the whole thing looked even more pathetic.

"When I called! Techno said that you don't want me anymore and you don't even remember me. But this is my basement now and here I will stay here, whether you like it or not!"

Nobody tried to argue with the latter. Mainly because no one paid the slightest attention to it. Phil and Wilbur immediately turned their heads and Techno froze, his back still pressed against the wall, far from the only exit than he would have liked.

He had to act fast. Even though he knew it didn't make much sense, he had to at least try, no matter what. He didn't even want to think about what Phil would do if he found out the whole truth, it was more than enough for him with what shock and disappointment he was looking at him with right now.

"No I didn't." He heard his own voice before he even realized he had opened his mouth. "He's lying."

Tommy pouted even more immediately.

"I'm not lying!"

"You're lying. I've never told you anything like that!" He was surprised at how composed, almost indifferent he was. Maybe it was stress, maybe it was desperation, or maybe it was just the fact that he was fighting for his life, almost literally. "Why would I do that?"

He could see the hesitation in Phil's face clearly, and for a moment, for a few short seconds, he almost believed he had a chance to get out of it. Phil had promised to always believe him. It was his word against Tommy's, no one had any evidence, and Tommy was just an imaginative kid looking for a good excuse.

But then Wilbur looked him straight in the eye, and before he said anything, Techno already knew.

"You did it." The words rang out much louder in the silence, cold and sharp. "You didn't want him to come back. You didn't want him from the beginning."

That was how his last hope had perished, and he had nothing left to do but run.

Chapter End Notes

Nobody expects raccoon in their basement!

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

It's comfort time!

And @Katricia helped me with it! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil found him less than half an hour later.

Techno was absolutely not surprised by this because, to tell the truth, he wasn't trying to hide at all. When the first wave of fear and adrenaline subsided - the one telling him to run, run, run and not look back, just as far as possible, as fast as possible - when he finally ran out of strength and paused for a moment to catch his breath, it dawned on him that even if he had been on the run all day, it still wouldn't change the fact that he had nowhere to go. He was hot and sweaty in his winter clothes, his ears buzzed, and his breakfast was dangerously close to coming back up, but most importantly - he was thirteen and just wanted to go home. Not to the chaos he caused himself, not to the consequences that had to be waiting, had to reach him at last - but the house from a few months ago, where he felt safe and secure, to a brother who cared for him and to a father who still cared for him and loved him.

Just the thought of Phil made his stomach twist even more with the stress, and he crouched down, burying his head between his knees, gasping in large gulps of air to keep from throwing up.

Phil must hate him. He must be so damn disappointed with him, so disappointed and angry and he probably never wanted to see him again, he probably wished he had ever taken him in at all, maybe he had even called Sam and asked if they could replace him with Tommy right away. Adoption was a permanent thing, he knew it, but if it took his biological parents one evening to abandon him, it couldn't be that hard. Would Phil let him go home at all? Maybe he had already packed his things? The 'parents' at House Number Six did just that, put his suitcases on the doorstep while he was at school, and he spent the next few hours waiting for someone from the social services to come pick him up. He remembered Nate talking all the way and his car smelling of fake mint that made him sick, almost as sick as he did now...

A good few minutes passed before he calmed down enough to straighten himself and sway to his feet, though his whole body wanted to just curl up on the ground and never get up again. Instead, he made his last effort and walked down the familiar, well-trodden path until the sand turned loose and the toes of his boots almost touched the lake's surface.

That's where Phil found him, seated on the bank, his forehead on his knees, and his heart racing the closer the heavy footsteps came. He didn't even have to look up, even without it he

knew who was standing next to him. The silence surprised him a bit. He had expected more screaming. He had expected harsh words and well-deserved complaints, and perhaps in his heart he had expected this to be the moment Phil would break his own rules and hit him for the first time. He wouldn't try to protest or make excuses.

But the silence dragged on and grew heavier and heavier, and at some point Techno realized that it wasn't a form of punishment, but an expression of sheer helplessness. Because there were no words that could say how much he fucked up and how many people he hurt.

For some reason, knowing it was worse than the silence itself.

And then, just as his desperation began to build up, when he was ready to just ask him to do something, whatever, yell at him or punish him or even send him away, Phil walked away a little further and leaned over, picking up something from the ground. Techno watched as he weighed a small pebble in his hand, then took a strong swing and tossed it at the surface of the lake, where it bounced three times before it disappeared under the water.

"I remember the first time I brought you here." He said, in a voice so far out of line with everything Techno expected that at first he seemed completely out of touch with reality. "I was teaching you how to skip rocks, remember?"

He looked down at him, raising an eyebrow, and Techno hesitated for a moment, then nodded uncertainly.

"I was mean to you then," he muttered, wrapping his arms around his legs tighter, but Phil just shook his head.

"You were scared. And hurt." He corrected, sitting down next on the damp sand, close enough that his presence would become something tangible, but far enough away that the boy still felt confident with his space. "I think you still are." He picked up another pebble and this time just twisted it in his fingers, brushing it off the sand. "But I'm not clairvoyant. And I still can't read minds, no matter how much I want to. I want to help you and I will support you no matter what, but I won't understand until you explain it to me."

Techno didn't take his eyes off Phil's hands and flinched slightly when one of them suddenly was much closer than before. He hesitated, but finally hesitantly removed a pebble from it, a rough stone made of thousands of smaller debris, quite different from the one still in his pocket, reminding him at every step of everything he had probably destroyed forever.

"Will you send me back?" He asked softly, not daring to look up, even when he heard a loud sigh.

"Of course not." Phil sounded so confident, so firm, but his reply made no sense, not when Techno deserved to be left alone, deserved to be unwanted and unloved again, just like he tried to convince Tommy of being.

"Why?" He asked, his voice trembling hard to stop. "I ruined everything. And it's my fault that Tommy—" He raised his free hand, slipping his fingers into his hair and clenching it

tightly. "Something could have happened to him. I couldn't help but think that he was all alone somewhere and probably hungry and scared, but even- even then I didn't tell you."

The answer didn't come right away, which somehow in and of itself spoke more than any words. But even so, the warm hand still cupped his fingers and carefully took them away from his head, holding a moment longer than necessary.

"You didn't," Phil admitted, still with the same firmness. "And I'm really angry about it. And very disappointed in you. But you're my son, Techno. I love you and I'll still be no matter what, even if you do something so damn stupid. Parents don't get rid of their children just because they made a mistake."

Techno scowled at him.

"They do that," he muttered, because he'd damn well had seen it far too many times. "All the time."

He could almost physically feel Phil's gaze soften.

"Not in our house," he said, which was reassuring on the one hand and only making Techno feel even more angry and frustrated on the other.

Because it would be easier to just accept the punishment and not have to explain anything. It would be easier to just lose everything and not have to worry about everyone hating him, getting up every day and seeing Wilbur avoid him, seeing how Tommy wants nothing to do with him. It would be easier to just walk away and not have to clean up his own mess, telling himself that the wrongs had been compensated.

But Phil would never allow anything simple. Phil and his non-replaceable dead goldfish and his stupid rules and his determination and all that Techno hated about him so much and for which he loved him so much.

Maybe that's why it hurt so much to know that he had let him down and disappointed him.

"It doesn't matter what I say," he said dryly, hurling the rock straight into the water without even trying to get it right.

Phil frowned as he watched him closely.

"Of course it does. I want-"

"You don't understand!" He shouted, unable to endure that sympathetic tone anymore, this attempt to understand something that was just not understandable, that wasn't that deep at all, that was just another proof that he was a bad person and an even worse child. "He- He cried. He called you and cried and wanted to talk to you. And I... I told him you didn't care. That you'd forgotten about him and didn't want to talk to him and that all you said was just- And before, when he said that if his mom didn't want him, then no one else would? It's my fault. Because... Because I yelled at him and told him really terrible things, that- that you only took him out of pity and that no one could stand him and-" He paused to take a breath, suddenly

realizing that at some point he must have started to cry. Hastily he wiped his cheeks with his sleeve. "And I was terrible to him before. And I called him annoying and told him to shut up and he almost cried, and- And I just threatened that if he told someone about it, I would do something to him."

He probably shouldn't be saying all this. It was probably not so much that he dug his own grave as entered the coffin and set up a tombstone. But despite all the fear and uncertainty and horrible remorse, he felt a little better, as if some of the burden had finally dropped from his shoulders. He knew that admitting guilt didn't really change anything, nor did it justify him in any way, but at least he could stop feeling like a coward.

He was beginning to understand why Phil hadn't just bought Wilbur a new fish - sometimes it was just easier to wait out all the sadness and anger than live with the perpetual fear that someone would discover a secret.

Now Phil said nothing. He sat in silence, staring at the lake, and his expression was unreadable. He was probably just wondering at what point he had made a mistake and blaming himself as he always was. Techno really wanted to assure him that he hadn't done anything wrong, that his son was just a lot worse than both of them had ever assumed, but somehow he didn't know how to do it. Maybe because deep down he still wanted someone to console him. He still wanted to hear that even if he had done so many bad things, everything could be fixed somehow.

"You would have taken him back," he said as the silence stretched and became unbearable. He rested his chin on his knees as Phil looked at him. "If I had told you he called. And you wouldn't send him back again, because..." He paused for the right words, then reached into his pocket for a small black pebble glistening in the pale sun. He didn't need it to remember that he liked Tommy. And maybe that was his biggest problem. "I know it's not fair. And it's not that I hate him and I know you and Wilbur want him to stay and he wants to stay too and... and he's still small and if he stays with you, he'll never get hurt again and he'll eventually forget and he will be... will be normal." He clenched his hand tightly, feeling the edges of the pebble dig into his skin. "And he's annoying and loud and moves my stuff, but he should stay with you. But that's not fair. It's not fair, I was here first and it's my family and he's not even more yours than me and -"

He shook his head, pressing his lips tight, but this time Phil came to his aid, pushing himself a little closer and slowly stroking his hair.

"Of course not," he assured him, much more gently than before. "Techno, look at me." He waited patiently as the boy gathered himself to listen. "Were you afraid that I was trying to replace you?"

Techno shook his head because he really would have to be an idiot to think that after all Phil had done for him, what he gave him, what he promised him.

And then he closed his eyes and nodded just as decisively because, apparently, he was actually just a stupid child and nothing else.

"He's better than me. Tommy. He's more... more everything. More normal."

Phil whirled his body around to him, gently running a hand down his cheek, inviting him to look up.

"You're perfectly normal, Techno. You and Wilbur have been through a lot and bad things have happened to you. Something like this always leaves scars. But that doesn't make you in any way less normal."

Techno grimaced as he moved beyond the reach of his warm hands. Why did he even assume Phil would understand? Of course he didn't understand, no one understood, not even himself!

"Wilbur doesn't count. He's... Because..." He waved his hands in frustration, trying to find any way not to sound pathetic, but finally gave up. "Because when he's so scared and so insecure, everyone wants to help him!"

Just as he had expected, Phil looked completely surprised and not at all close to understanding.

"Techno. You know-"

"I know! But...! But when I'm freaking out, I'm always the worst! And I always have to do something stupid, or say something mean, or..." He took a deep breath and tucked his shoulders up, resting his forehead on his knees as he ran his fingers through his hair. This time he gripped them even tighter as larger hands caught his own. "I love Wilbur," he said, squeezing his eyes shut tightly to hold back tears. "He's my brother, I am stuck with him. But sometimes... Sometimes I wish people would look at me and feel sorry for me too, instead of thinking how terrible I am. But he always has to be so perfect and I look even worse compared to him."

He felt an arm clutching him tightly and allowed himself to be locked in a hug, his breath getting faster and tears choking down his throat.

"Wilbur's not perfect, Techno. Nobody is."

"But he's close enough. And Tommy... Tommy's like that too. He's small and funny, and you think he's cute, and even when he starts freaking out, it's never..." He took a deep breath, desperately trying to keep the last of his composure. "He's so..." he tried again, and suddenly realized that he no longer had the strength to hold back either crying or emotions. He looked up, letting the tears run down his cheeks as he looked Phil straight in the eye for the first time. "Why couldn't you find me sooner? When I was still like that too?"

Until he said it aloud, until he heard his own voice, he had no idea how much the thought hurt him. The thought that Tommy got a chance he never had, that he missed all the horrible things he had to go through, that he wouldn't wake up to nightmares at night, wouldn't be embarrassed to roll up his sweatshirt sleeves, wouldn't think five times whether he can say something, or he can do something.

He won't have to wonder why anyone would ever love him.

He knew it was unfair to ask about it like that, and he wasn't surprised when Phil shook his head, looking at him with such a sad look as if he really understood this time.

"Sometimes I wonder about it myself," he confessed, drawing him closer, letting him hide his face in his arm, and stroking his back when he finally let himself cry. "I'm so sorry..."

He said something else, but Techno couldn't make out the individual words anymore, focused on the voice itself, on the warm embrace, on the hand sliding slowly down his back and his own breathing, shallow and trembling, until the spasmodic crying turned to broken sobs and then to silent tears, and he rested his cheek on Phil's shoulder, staring impassively at the surface of the lake.

"Do you hate me now?" He asked after a long moment.

And maybe it was naive of him, but he believed he knew the answer before he heard it.

"Never." Phil leaned in to kiss his hair. "I'm angry with you and you have let me down a lot, but I could never hate you."

"Very angry?" He asked, getting a meaningful grunt in response.

"Like hell. I believed you were much more responsible and never thought that you could even think of doing something so stupid and cruel." He sighed loudly. "But I think it's largely my fault."

Techno frowned, stepping back to look at him.

"You didn't do anything," he protested, but Phil just shook his head.

"Exactly. I saw you couldn't cope, but I didn't do anything. I wanted to treat you like an adult, but I think I forgot that you're still a child and sometimes..." He hesitated and grimaced slightly, but when he spoke again he sounded determined. "Sometimes I have the right to say that I know better about what's good for you."

Techno didn't understand right away and tensed, alarmed. But then something in his head finally snapped into place and he wrinkled his nose.

"You're going to send me to therapy," he said more than asked, with a resentment that he couldn't conceal and that Phil was not the least bit impressed with.

"Yes. And no matter what you say, I won't change my mind. You lied to Tommy, Techno," he reminded him a little more sharply, and the boy immediately lost all desire to protest further. "You told him that no one cares about him and that he's completely alone and on his own. I will never believe you did it out of ill will. I know you're not a bad person. But if you don't work through your own problems, you may hurt someone again in the future. And this time it could all end up much worse than with the dirty little raccoon in our basement. I don't want you to become someone like that, and I'll do absolutely anything to prevent that from happening, whether you like it or not."

It sounded very logical, especially when he said it like this: like he was really worried and wanted to help, and not just trying to punish him. But even that wasn't enough to dispel all doubts, so even though he felt bloody stupid about it and like a scared little child, Techno finally dared to say out loud what he should have said more than two years ago:

"I'm scared."

Phil didn't laugh at him or call him childish. He didn't say there was no need to fear. He simply put his hair behind his ears and asked with complete calm:

"What are you the most scared about?"

"That... That I'm broken. Like, completely. But also..." He pulled the sleeves of his jacket tight over his hands. "That I'm not at all. Broken, I mean. That I was meant to be like this from the beginning."

Phil's face softened, and when he reached out to cup Techno's face in his hands, he looked almost affectionate.

"Of course you were. You've been like this from the start," he assured him, smiling slightly. "Smart. And brave. And incredibly clever. And so caring that you sometimes embarrass yourself with it."

Techno grimaced but made no effort to shake his hands away.

"You know that's not true," he muttered, sniffing with a sad nose that was about to be smacked with a finger.

"All I know is that a boy once told me that I never lie," he recalled, which was a very dirty play, but Techno had a hard time pointing it out. "Sometimes you do something very stupid, I don't deny it. And sometimes you say something damn nasty. Like absolutely every human being. And every time I see how much you regret it. You demand a lot from yourself and it's good that you want to change for the better. But that won't happen overnight. You need time. You need to know how to go about it. You don't get better by repeating over and over that you're a bad person." He looked at his son expectantly, and seeing the disbelief in his eyes, he let out a slow breath. "Remember when you failed at school in the beginning?" Techno, a bit confused, nodded slowly. "Do you think you'd be better off if I yelled at you and told you to do something about it right now?"

"Probably not..."

"And would you do that to Wilbur?"

He looked away.

"No..."

"Exactly. So why are you doing this to yourself?"

"Because...! Because that's different. Because I'm with you now. And I'm fine," he added emphatically. "And before, I might have thought I was doing stupid things because I have no other choice, but now I do and- And I can see that I'm just stupid." He hung his shoulders helplessly, disappointed more with himself than with anything else. "I thought if I stayed with you, I would be okay."

Phil thought for a moment, biting the inside of his cheek.

"Could you live in a house with a hole in the wall?" He asked so suddenly that all Techno could do was blink and glare at him in shock.

"What?"

"If you had a big hole in the wall," he repeated, as if it didn't sound absurd enough the first time, "would you feel good about it?"

Techno waited a while, mostly to make sure that all this was not an introduction to some kind of joke.

"No?" He stammered out finally. "Someone could come in through it?"

"Yhm."

"And it would rain? And it would be cold."

Phil raised his eyebrows and pretended to think deeply about something.

"What if it was a really nice house. With lots of nice things."

Techno looked at him sidelong.

"There's a hole in the wall. I don't need nice things, I need to fix it," he said, and to his surprise, Phil immediately straightened and smiled with satisfaction as if that was the answer he had been waiting for.

"Exactly."

With every second of the conversation, Techno not only understood less and less, but was also less and less sure if he really wanted to understand at all.

"Are you telling me I'm leaky?"

"I say that when something really bad has happened to you, sometimes you can't get over it just like that. You can have a lot of nice things happen to you and you can have a happy life, but you won't be able to enjoy it until you solve the problem. You've made a lot of progress, Techno. And I'm so proud of you. But it seems to me that you're focusing a little too much on decorating your home and not enough on repairing a hole in the wall."

Techno wasn't entirely sure how exactly they went from talking about visiting Puffy to the construction industry, but he had to admit that in some strange, undefined way it actually

made the whole thing feel a little less scary.

"And therapy will help patch it up?" He asked, shuffling his shoes on the sand. His pants were soaking wet and he was starting to feel really cold, even with the jacket and sweaters.

"Therapy will show you how to do it, step by step. I'm not gonna tell you it's easy, because it isn't. Sometimes it's... weird," he admitted, sighing softly. "And sometimes it's very hard. Working on yourself is rarely easy. But I think you should at least try it."

It didn't sound as bad as he expected. Tiring, yes, and it was a big change that he wasn't ready for, but when Phil put his arm around him and let him rest his head on his shoulder, Techno figured he could at least try. He could promise to do his best and actually try to keep his word, and he could do it not only for his family, but most of all for himself.

All the mess he'd made didn't magically disappear thanks to a single moment of honesty. Wilbur still hated him, Tommy would probably never trust him again, but he had to accept the consequences and try to fix things, step by step, even if it would take a long time.

Perhaps he would prefer to postpone it a bit more.

"We have to go back." Phil straightened, standing up and shaking his hand, and Techno hesitated before grabbing it and pulling himself up.

"Wilbur hates me," he sighed, stating the fact more than complaining. "And Tommy too."

Phil opened his mouth, clearly wanting to deny it, but even he couldn't conjure reality like that, so he finally nodded.

"I'm sure you owe them an apology," he admitted diplomatically. "But I'm also sure they'll forgive you. Maybe not right away, but after some time. But it's okay that you're not ready to talk to them just yet. We'll do this: when we get home, you can go straight to your room," he suggested. "I'll talk to boys. I won't go into any details, but I'll try to explain everything as best I can. Then you can decide for yourself how much and to whom you want to tell. What do you think?" Techno nodded slowly, slipping his hands into his pockets to hide their trembling, but Phil, of course, noticed anyway. "Hey, come on. Everything will be fine. You've done something very stupid, but you're sorry and no one has been hurt, and that's the most important thing."

They spent most of the way in silence, Phil focused on the road, Techno with his nose against the glass, observing the surroundings he knew well down to the smallest detail.

"Tommy will stay, won't he?" He asked at one point, not taking his eyes off the houses he was passing by. He could see Phil's reflection in the glass and the way his face tightened with determination.

"If I have anything to say about it, yes," he admitted, then as if reading his mind, he took one hand from the steering wheel and squeezed his son's arm lightly. "He's not your replacement, Techno. He never was."

For the first time, Techno was really ready to believe it.

"For how long am I grounded?" He asked, more playfully this time.

Phil's mouth twitched slightly in a smile.

"You won't live long enough to see the end of it."

That also, unfortunately, sounded very likely.

Chapter End Notes

Just to be clear - having a trauma isn't a reason to hurt other people and it's not an excuse. Techno is still a kid, he simply doesn't know any better, so it's easy to forgive him. But he won't have that excuse forever and that's why Phil's going to put him in therapy. It's not a punishment, it's just the only logical way to help him.

Anyways... THEY FINALLY TALKED! Yay!

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Therapy time!

Short chapter, but next one will be up on monday ;)

With @Katricia's help, of course!

Techno wanted to be able to say that in the few minutes of the car ride he had managed to gather his courage, that he was ready to face the consequences of his own actions, and didn't want to run away at all, even before he even entered the house. Unfortunately, he wouldn't have believed such an obvious lie himself, not when his hands were trembling to such an extent that he could barely press the door handle and for all the treasures of the world he couldn't bring himself to raise his head and take his eyes off the floor.

He didn't even take off his jacket, casually kicking off his boots and sending them against the wall with one kick before running up the stairs, jumping two steps at a time and ignoring Wilbur calling him from somewhere in the living room. He wasn't sure if it was a good sign that his brother had spoken to him at all, he was probably just furious and wanted to say some very unpleasant things to him in person. But after weeks of silence, Techno wasn't at all sure if screaming and resentment would be better than ignoring it all the time.

He only stopped when he hid around the corner and was sure that no one was trying to follow him. He inhaled deeply, allowing himself to loosen his shoulders a bit and slump down the wall, unable to stand on his trembling legs any longer. His breathing seemed way too loud to him, especially when he tried to focus on the sounds coming from below, but still he put his hand over his mouth and moved a little closer to the stairs, leaning slightly around the corner.

He could only see part of the corridor from where Phil was hanging his jacket, but two smaller shadows fell on the far wall, so apparently Tommy had finally decided to leave his basement hiding place.

"Is he okay?" Wilbur took a step towards the stairs, but stopped when Phil shook his head. "What did he say?" He asked, but his voice was more concerned than anger or accusations. "You- you won't send him back, will you? I know you're angry, but you can't-!"

Phil closed his eyes for a moment and Techno could bet that hearing that question again had just taken a few more years of his life away. And he probably didn't have too many of them left at this point.

"Wilbur." He put his hands on his son's shoulders, waiting a moment until he looked into his eyes. "Relax. Everything's fine now. We'll talk later, okay?" He smiled slightly when a short nod answered him, but then he turned serious as he looked at the younger boy, lurking behind, still peering at him distrustfully. "Tommy. I called Sam. He's on his way now."

The boy immediately puffed up its cheeks.

"But-!" He was probably already planning to stamp his foot, but Phil silenced him by raising his hand.

"He was very worried about you. We all were." He added, crouching and holding out his hand to the boy, which Tommy grasped uncertainly after a moment's hesitation. "He had a right to know you were safe and sound, and it was my duty to say you were here. That's the first thing. Second..." He paused for a moment, looking at one then the other, before he sighed heavily. "I talked to him and we agreed that you will return to the center for now."

This time it was Wilbur who blew up with indignation.

"Dad!"

"Wilbur, don't interrupt me. Just for a few days." He turned back to Tommy, who had already yanked his hand out of his grip and clung to Wilbur's shoulder with both hands as if to show that they would have to separate them by force. "This is really the best way out of the situation, trust me, we have analyzed them all. Completing all the formalities will take some time, and I want Tommy to stay 'legally' with us, not by hiding in our basement."

Tommy's head jerked up immediately, exchanging glances at Wilbur.

"So I can stay? Here?" He reassured himself, slowly loosening his grip, but still keeping close to his potential defender. "And I won't have to go anywhere anymore?"

"As long as I have anything to say about it. And trust me, I have a lot."

Tommy glanced up again, before finally daring to come closer and let his outstretched arms embrace him.

"You mean you want me?" He asked in a much softer voice, resting his hands on Phil's chest as he stood up, taking him in his arms. "Really?"

"Really."

Techno couldn't see the boy's expression well from upstairs, but a sniff gave a certain idea of what it would be.

"And you didn't know I called?" Tommy asked, wiping his nose with his sleeve. Apparently, the yellow sweater had already been written off. "But Techno said..."

Sitting in his hideout at the top of the stairs, Techno huddled even tighter, pulling his knees up to his chin. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear the rest of the conversation, but somehow he felt that he didn't deserve to just run away from it. He thought of the table covered with the

white bedspread, how cold and dark it must have been in the basement at nights, how Tommy would wake up every day and fall asleep listening to their footsteps somewhere above his head, thinking that he was alone and nobody cared about him .

He shuddered at Phil's voice, still calm and composed but much more firm than before.

"Techno lied."

"Oh." The child was silent for a moment. "But why?"

Techno rested his forehead on his knees, wrapping his arms around his legs, as if he could hide from the world that way.

He had no idea what the true answer was. Or at least a good answer, one that would stop him from feeling so vile, one that would give him any right to try to forgive himself, any excuse, and a chance to look at himself in the mirror one day without disgust.

It was quiet downstairs, and for a moment he was afraid that maybe Phil, for the first time, couldn't find any way to protect him. But then he heard footsteps, and a slightly softer voice slowly receding into the living room.

"Tommy, do you remember how you felt when Wilbur locked you in the bathroom?"

Tommy hummed, clearly unhappy that anyone was recalling that event again.

"Not good..."

"You were scared, weren't you?"

"I'm big! I'm not scared of anything!" He was indignant, but then, albeit with obvious reluctance, he added: "Maybe a little..."

"Yhm. Exactly. You see, people have done a lot of very bad things to Techno in his life. When someone hurts you so much, later on you sometimes... you react more to some things than others. And sometimes it looks very strange from the outside, or it doesn't make sense at all. It's as if you suddenly think you're locked in a very small room. And even if all doors are open, in your head you're trapped and you get scared. Because sometimes it's very difficult to believe what everyone around you is saying, more than what you 'see' yourself.

Techno blinked, slowly lifting his head and straightening himself, wiping his wet cheeks with his sleeve.

Tommy was no less surprised than him, judging by his incredulous tone.

"Techno was scared?" He asked, as if he couldn't imagine it.

"Very. What he did was cruel and wrong. And you have every right to be angry with him. You too, Wilbur. But I want you both to remember that when someone is very scared, they sometimes do stupid things that they regret so much later."

Neither of the boys replied. Perhaps it was because no one really expected any immediate declaration from them, or maybe because they just didn't know what to make of it themselves yet. Techno certainly didn't know. But he was temporarily too tired to think about it any longer. The emotions of the days began to come back to him one by one, and he had enough strength to reach the room, take off his jacket and sweaters, and fall on the bed, letting his consciousness again engulf a thick layer of snow and ice.

For the first time in a long, long time, he quietly hoped to find a safe place at last.

* * *

The days without Tommy that followed passed much faster and calmer than anyone might have expected. Wilbur spent most of his free time hanging up posters, photos and flags of L'Manburg in Tommy's room, and he even built a blanket and pillow fortress in the center, insisting that this would surely be the first thing the boy would want to see after returning. Phil, at least time and again trying to curb his creativity a bit, most of the time just watched him lovingly and filled the kitchen cupboards with more packets of cookies and cans of Coke. Techno, on the other hand, did his best to get out of the way for everyone. It didn't always work, because whether he wanted to or not, he still had to go to school and at least twice a day had to endure too long and too awkward driving, lunch break, and sometimes also dinner, but to his own amazement he quickly noticed that it was not as bad as expected. He felt stupid, out of place, and had the constant feeling that any moment someone would reproach him, but after a few days he began to come to terms with the idea that apparently most of these fears only existed in his head.

Most of it. Some, such as the impending date for Puffy's first visit, were all too realistic. So on Wednesday night he volunteered to wash the dishes himself, mostly to find something else to do besides worrying to death, and he was so engrossed in thinking only about the plates that he almost dropped one when Wilbur suddenly appeared right next door.

"You're going to therapy," he said more than asked as he watched his brother catch the slippery dish in his fingers at the last moment.

Techno nodded, but he still felt the piercing gaze on him and was absolutely sure it wouldn't change until he gave a slightly more complex answer.

"Yhm," he muttered, and when that wasn't enough, he added, "Phil insisted."

He wasn't entirely sure if he could still joke like that. Apparently not, because Wilbur didn't smile and just kept staring at him with the same seriousness, as if he was waiting for something.

"About time," he finally said, and Techno immediately looked away, focusing on scrubbing the burnt pan to avoid accidentally showing that the dry tone hurt him a bit. He knew he had screwed up, and that everything would probably have been five times easier if he hadn't

resisted admitting that he was just crazy and needed someone to miraculously fix him as much as possible. He really didn't need constant reminders.

But Wilbur stubbornly refused to leave him alone. On the contrary, he took a dry cloth from the table and reached for the plate that Techno had set aside a moment ago, beginning to wipe it.

"Hey." After a moment of silence on both sides, Wilbur suddenly nudged his side with his elbow. "I didn't mean it maliciously, you know?" He smiled slightly, actually sounding a lot softer. Like he used to be, when he still had reasons to be nice to Techno. "I'm just glad you're giving it a try. It really helps."

Techno had heard it so many times in the last few days that he was slowly starting to believe it, if only to make everyone stop saying it. But he could appreciate the gesture, so he just nodded. And then, since he was himself and always had to mess things up, he shrugged.

"I don't know if anything could help me," he muttered, wincing. "I'm a bit of a hopeless case."

He tried to sound like a joke, but Wilbur immediately smacked him over the head with a cloth.

"Hey! Don't say that!" he was so indignant that Techno instinctively curled his arms a little and muttered "Sorry...".

"Now, that's better." Wilbur judged pleased, going back to drying. "If you say that again, I'll tell dad."

This time the corners of his mouth twitched slightly, so Techno smiled as well and nudged him aggressively on the ankle.

"Sneak"

He didn't have to wait long for him to get a kick himself as well.

"I'm a big brother now, I have my responsibilities." Wilbur puffed out his chest proudly, and although the statement itself was innocent and humorous, the atmosphere immediately froze and they both turned their heads, focusing only on the plates and the rushing water for a long moment. Phil usually didn't let them wash the dishes together - he said they wasted way too much water, the floor was all flooded, and they looked like they'd just come back from the shower. But this time he clearly decided they needed the moment, even if under such strange circumstances, because no one had come to instruct them to finally turn off the tap.

So the water was still pouring, and Techno kept his hands under it for a few moments after there was nothing left in the sink to wash.

"Do you hate me now?" He asked finally as the skin on his fingers began to wrinkle and his eyes began to moisten, even though they had no contact with the water.

Wilbur leaned over the sink, turned off the tap, and suddenly everything was much quieter.

"I don't hate you," he replied, slowly and thoughtfully. "You're my brother, I can't hate you, not really. But..." He bit the inside of his cheek. "But I don't think I forgive you yet."

It was probably the best Techno could count on at the moment. In fact, he didn't even expect it, and at first he just closed his eyes, relaxing and letting himself breathe a little deeper than the last few days.

"It's okay."

Wilbur shrugged.

"I know it's okay."

Then he turned on the tap and suddenly splashed the water on his brother's feet.

If Phil had any comment about their squeaks and soaked clothes, he kept it to himself and only shook his head as they snuck through the living room, leaving footprints on the floor.

* * *

Even with all the newfound hope and support from an unexpected source, Techno didn't feel any more confident when Phil drove him to Puffy's office on the Thursday after school. In fact, he was terrified and seriously wondered how long he would be able to keep his face blank and pretend that his stomach hadn't twisted into a knot and that he could still swallow through his constricted throat. Especially since he wasn't fooling anyone and Phil needed exactly one glance to see him right through.

"Ready?" He asked, although the answer was obvious and he knew it best, judging by the fact that he immediately squeezed his son's hand lightly and smiled reassuringly.

Techno looked out the window at the almost empty parking lot and the gray, tall building.

"Not really," he admitted frankly, shrugging his shoulders. "But I have no choice, right?"

He tried not to sound like he was complaining, but there was still irritation in his voice. He couldn't pinpoint exactly what he was angry at. Probably mostly on himself for needing any help at all. That he had allowed things to get so far, and everything had gone so bad to finally overcome his stubbornness and reluctance.

If Phil felt offended, he didn't show it.

"Hey, everything will be fine," he assured, and seeing that Techno just winced, he added immediately, "A little weird, at first, yes. But you really have nothing to fear. Puffy won't force you to do anything. If you feel like it, you can tell her for an hour about what you ate for dinner, or repeat all the stories about George that Dream is making you tired of. I used to

tell my therapist throughout my session how you two brought fireworks home and destroyed our new carpet."

Techno raised his eyebrows, smiling involuntarily.

"Seriously?" He snorted, and Phil grimaced. Apparently he still didn't find the incident insanely amusing. Another proof that the old people had no sense of humor.

"I was really angry about that," he muttered, then sighed and repeated a little louder and much more confidently: "Everything's going to be fine, you'll see."

It's hard to say that he could really convince anyone of that. Techno wondered if Wilbur had ever heard the same assurance, and if it made him feel any better. But anyway, he wasn't going to be worse than his stupid then ten-year-old brother, so he gathered up all the last of his courage and slowly, as slowly as possible, unbuckled his seat belt.

"Okay. If you say so..." he muttered, reluctantly reaching for the door, but froze with his fingers on the doorknob. "But you'll be waiting for me, right?"

When spoken it sounded much more childish than it had been in his head, but Phil just smiled and nodded.

"Per hour. I won't be late."

"Okay." He took a deep breath and held the air for a moment. "Okay," he repeated, more to himself than to anyone else.

Phil frowned as he studied him.

"Are you sure you don't want me to walk you in?" He asked, probably because in a good two minutes Techno had done nothing to actually open the door. Only now, shaking his head quickly, he pulled the handle and let the piercingly cold, damp air into the car.

"I can do it," he assured, although everything in him shouted that he would definitely prefer to stay in a warm armchair for all eternity. "I promise not to run away or anything."

Phil didn't look amused at the joke. If anything, he seemed even more concerned.

"Techno." He squeezed his hand again, a little tighter and longer this time, waiting for the boy to turn to meet his eyes. "You know I love you, right? And I would never make you do anything if I wasn't absolutely sure it would help you?"

Even if another gust of wind slipped under his jacket and covered his back with goose bumps, Techno could swear that for a moment, for one, short second, the whole world became much warmer.

"I know."

He still remembered it an hour later, and it was probably the only thing that allowed him to reach the car and stay awake in the middle of the parking lot on the way. He was absolutely exhausted, even though he had been just sitting up for the past sixty minutes, pulling on the sleeves of his sweatshirt and trying to relax even a little. His jaw and back ached, and he couldn't help feeling that absolutely everything he said (and it wasn't particularly much) was either extremely stupid or just plain nonsensical, but on the whole, to his amazement, he had to admit that it wasn't that bad.

Puffy was nice. She smiled, spoke in a calm, gentle voice, but didn't try to treat him like a baby or a scared pet. She made no attempt to pursue topics he was uncomfortable with, ignored the fact that he was fidgeting in his chair and was likely to tear the strings off his hood soon, and even laughed at his sarcasm a few times. Was he completely comfortable in her presence and was he ready to entrust her with his innermost secrets? Hell no! But he was prepared to admit that maybe in a few weeks' time, he would actually trust her enough. And that meant a lot for him.

Just as it meant a lot that Phil made no attempt to question. He didn't want to know what they were talking about and he didn't demand a complete transcript of the conversation, preferably in an audio version. He also didn't expect that when Techno gets into the car he would be a completely new person, or that all problems will automatically disappear, because since he has already spent a lot of money on therapy, he wants to see some results.

Instead, he just smiled, and when Techno sank heavily into his chair and closed the door behind him, he reached over the back of the seat and handed him a bag.

"Wilbur usually gets really hungry after talking to Puffy," he explained as the boy peered inside and raised an eyebrow at the sight of several packets of jelly beans, chips, and a McDonald's meal. "Or it's just a way to de-stress, I'm not sure. I didn't know what you would like to do, so I went to the classics."

"Oh." Techno hesitantly took a closer look at the contents of the bag and smiled involuntarily when he realized that the 'classics' apparently included all his favorite things. Phil even remembered that the year before, he and Wilbur had both been obsessed with melon bubble gum. "Thanks."

In fact, he wasn't particularly hungry, and his stomach was still tight with stress, but he still reached for a burger, a little cold but still full of perfectly balanced, empty calories. He slumped a little lower in the seat, staring out the window, but his thoughts were so far away that he hadn't even noticed at first that the view behind the glass was unchanged, and the car hadn't moved an inch.

Phil tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Do you want to go somewhere?" He asked when his son looked at him questioningly.

"Now? But Wilbur..."

"I warned him we'd be later. We have at least an hour." He nodded at the windshield, seeming to say, 'Come on, take whatever direction you want'. "Wilbur used to like going to the pet

store. He said that looking at the fish calmed him down."

Techno had no doubts about it.

"He was just manipulating you," he said, and Phil smiled the same way he always knew when he knew he was way too soft, but he wasn't going to change that.

"Yes, I am fully aware of that."

The next few minutes passed in silence, broken only by the rustle of the candy wrappers which the boy had generously decided to share. He wondered if it was all right that he felt more confident and safer in this silence than with Puffy, but ultimately decided it was pointless to expect an hour of therapy to have the same effect as almost three years of slow, painstakingly building trust. Plus, Phil was... special. He was what Wilbur once called a "special person" - somewhere above all hierarchy and division.

"What do you usually do?" He asked, opening the packet of jellies and putting a handful in his mouth every now and then. On reflection, maybe he was actually hungry after all. A bit. "After therapy, I mean."

Phil shrugged, but thought for a moment.

"Nothing special. Usually just..." He made an indefinite gesture with his hand. "I sit in the car and gather myself together."

"To not kill us?" Techno raised his eyebrows, to which Phil immediately responded with a mute reproach.

"To bear with the thought that sometimes I just don't know what I'm doing," he corrected, then shook his head in resignation. "Most of the time, to be honest."

Techno wanted to say something smart, something that maybe he didn't always have to know, or that even if he did, he was doing quite well at improvising. That he is a good father, the best they could have had, and definitely better than they deserved. But if he were good at saying things like that and expressing emotions openly, they probably wouldn't need to be here right now.

"Quackity and Sapnap broke up with Karl." He just said, turning the gummy bear in his fingers. "Because he forgot their anniversary."

"Oh." Phil sounded genuinely interested and made no comment how much of the topic had come out of nowhere. "Wait, they were still together all this time?"

"Yeah. But they have already made up. Because it turned out that Karl really has some memory problems, so it's stupid to be offended by that. So they're a pain in the ass again."

They returned home a little over an hour later, even in the hallway, taking off their shoes, still in a lively discussion about how best to survive a zombie attack and whether it even makes

sense to procrastinate the inevitable. Wilbur, watching a movie on the couch, just leaned over the backrest and raised his eyebrows at them as if he understood way too much. Techno threw a packet of gum on his lap before running upstairs, far too exhausted for a day. He collapsed onto the bed and pressed against Steve's chest, hiding his face in the soft fur and breathing deeply, a full chest that was lighter by at least part of the weight that had been choking him for months.

That night, a bright warm light finally appeared on the horizon of the ice desert.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Yooo! I worked at this with @Katricia! Pog!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sam brought Tommy on Friday afternoon.

Techno didn't go downstairs, but through the window he could see and hear the boy running across the lawn, stumbling, picking himself up and bursting at full speed right into Wilbur's outstretched arms. They both laughed loudly and shouted, trying to quickly summarize the last few days, until it finally started to sound more like a quarrel, Tommy started jumping up and screaming and Wilbur smacked him on the back of the head to keep him quiet for a moment while 'the elders talk'. Phil finally separated them, taking Tommy in his arms and immediately being locked in a firm, probably almost suffocating grip on his arms and legs. He didn't look like he was going to complain.

He was much less pleased when Sam pulled two garbage bags from the trunk and set them on the doorway with an almost apologetic face, even if it wasn't his fault.

"I don't know what exactly they packed," he admitted, "but I can tell you it was definitely heavier when I was carrying it before..."

Even from upstairs, Techno could almost physically feel the disdain of Phil as he stared at the packages, pressing Tommy to his chest in a defensive gesture.

"Whatever," he said dryly, taking one bag while Wilbur grabbed the other, picking it up far too easily. "Things can be replaced. Most importantly, Tommy's alive and well."

As lofty as that sounded, it was a slight twist on the facts, because Tommy, in fact, was not completely healthy. Apparently, staying overnight in the basement with an eternal draft had its consequences and resulted in an extremely bothersome runny nose, from which he still hadn't managed to fully cure yet. Which meant a lot of slurping, lots of snarling, and even more used tissues scattered all over the house. Techno sat in the room all afternoon, listening to the conversation and laughter coming from the next room, which was just being restored to its original sanctity, and it wasn't until the evening that he ventured down to the kitchen. Already on the stairs he found two casually thrown white balls, and gathered a few more from the table before he could even start preparing the food. He preferred not to even imagine how many sleeves would fall as innocent victims of the disease.

He was just pouring cereal into a bowl when he caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye and almost dropped the box at the sight of Tommy standing in the doorway.

For a moment they stared at each other, Techno motionless, the boy with his head tilted slightly and his expression full of utmost concentration.

"Phil said he wanted me," he said finally, surprisingly firmly for someone who, only a few days earlier, believed that the basement would be his new home. "And that he didn't know I called." He frowned, leaning forward and lifting his chin, probably to appear taller. "So you lied to me."

Techno would be naive to assume that he would never come to hear that question, or that he wouldn't be forced to tell the truth, no matter how horrible it might be. But despite everything, even though everyone already knew the answer, he still had a hard time saying it aloud. He was sure confessing to Phil was the worst, it should be the worst. But he was only afraid of his father's reaction, and he couldn't even look at Tommy without his burning shame and the realization that he didn't deserve forgiveness.

He took a deep breath, slowly setting the bowl and box down on the counter.

"Yes," he admitted, hoping it would hurt less if he did it quickly. Like breaking a patch or one precise cut.

But Tommy just wrinkled his nose and tilted his head the other way as if to see him from a different perspective.

"Why?"

Techno stared at his own feet, clenching his fingers on the sleeves of his sweatshirt. He could lie and come up with something while Tommy waited. He could say that he didn't know himself, which wasn't entirely a lie, because he was still combining facts and looking for an explanation for his own feelings. But for some reason it couldn't pass his throat. Tommy might have been small, but he wasn't stupid and deserved to be taken seriously. He deserved to know why he had been hurt and to be able to decide for himself whether or not the reason was sufficient.

"Because..." He swallowed loudly, but made himself go on. "Because I didn't want you to come back. For you to stay longer. I guess- I guess I was afraid you would replace me. And that everyone would love you more than me."

He didn't know what he was expecting. Maybe Tommy would try to understand, like Phil, or he might need more time, like Wilbur. Certainly not that the child thinks for a moment, sway on his heels and ask in a much softer tone:

"And now you're not afraid anymore?"

Techno blinked in surprise.

"A little less," he admitted, which may not have been the perfect answer and may not have had the right to be the one with conditions and requirements, but it was still honest.

Tommy nodded.

"And you want me to stay?"

Of all the possible questions, this was the one Techno feared the most.

Because he really didn't know.

"I'm working on it," he confessed, and Tommy hummed, clearly not entirely pleased. "But I still have it," he added quickly, taking a shiny black pebble from his pocket. The boy's eyes widened immediately as the colored highlights fell straight onto his face. "So I remember that I like you and... and that helps a little."

He wasn't sure it would be enough. In fact, he thought it shouldn't. But his family had never been completely normal, and Tommy was a part of it now, so it shouldn't be surprising that after a while he smiled as brightly as possible.

"Want to watch 'Up' with us?"

Techno, to tell you the truth, didn't want to. Mainly because he knew the film by heart and could play any of the roles, or even all of them at once. But he was also of the opinion that sometimes you had to take a well-deserved dose of karma and atone for the fact that it was his fault that the six-year-old had spent a week in a cold, damp basement. Compared to that, an hour and a half of a movie didn't seem like such bad compensation.

Wilbur was already seated on the couch among the blankets and pillows, wielding the remote like an instrument of absolute power. He raised his eyebrows at the sight of them, but smiled and shifted so that Tommy could take his place in the center, squeezed in a warm cocoon, with a supply of tissues which he stubbornly ignored. Techno took his seat as far away as possible, not entirely sure how much he could afford and still feeling a bit like an uninvited guest.

"I didn't think I'd ever be so pleased to see a movie for the millionth time," Phil said as he walked down to the living room moments later with his laptop under his arm. He paused at the couch and leaned over the backrest to kiss Tommy on the top of his head and hold him in for a second, which was met with a displeased grunt as he interrupted a very important scene. "And Henry isn't watching with you?"

Tommy, staring at the screen so far with his mouth parted and an almost thoughtless face, suddenly tense, pushed harder into the seat, and slumped a little lower into the tangle of blankets. He was silent for a moment, pressing his lips together in a narrow line, but all the while he still didn't take his eyes off the movie.

"They took him," he finally muttered, softly and indistinctly. Phil heard, however, and froze, one hand on the back of the chair and the other on the laptop.

"Sorry?"

The child shifted uneasily, arms tucked under his ears.

"They took him from me because they said I was too big to have a stuffed animal." He grunted, but the way he glanced at Phil showed that he was a little afraid of his reaction after all. Or rather, the lack of it. "And I said it was terrible bullshit because Techno and Wilbur are older and they have stuffed animals. And my new dad said you were a bad dad then, and I said "No, you are," and that pissed them off. And they took Henry and I couldn't find him when I was running away."

He began to twist a piece of the blanket in his fingers while Phil closed his laptop slowly, never taking his eyes off the boy for a second. He looked almost indifferent, but Techno knew him too well not to notice the anger in his eyes and how tense his muscles were. He exchanged a knowing look with Wilbur.

"Ah. I see." Phil took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, he was reaching for his cell phone from his pocket. "Boys?" He looked first at one son, then at the other. "Watch Tommy for me, will you? I have to do something. Tommy." He stepped closer and leaned over the couch a second time, this time to ruffle the kid's hair. "Everything will be alright. I'll be back in a moment."

Perhaps Tommy could sense the tension in his voice, and his poorly hidden anger, but he made no attempt to protest and just nodded. Phil smiled, kissed his fair hair one more time, and turned to the door, dialing the number on the phone.

"Nate? Yes, yes, a lot of years and so on. To the point. I need a little favor..."

Phil was gone for a good three hours. 'Up' was long over and Wilbur won the right to choose another film in the competition entitled "Who will scream the loudest". Techno just watched from the sidelines, finding he still didn't want to descend to a certain level. Nobody asked him if he wanted to be part of the great tangle of limbs, but he wasn't going to complain about that in any particular way. Wilbur's hair tickled his cheek as his brother rested his temple on his shoulder, and Tommy was practically dozing off, stretched across their laps, complaining repeatedly that they both 'had too much bones'. It was hot and a bit uncomfortable and Techno lost feeling in his hand after the first fifteen minutes, but he still felt better than he had at any time in the last months.

It was in this position that Phil found them when he finally came home, well after their normal bedtime, and closed the door behind him as softly as possible. For a good few minutes Tommy hadn't given any sign that his mind was still in their world, but he opened his eyes immediately as Phil lifted his arm and carefully slid the stuffed cow underneath it.

The boy blinked, looked at the toy, and immediately sprang to a seat, pressing the stuffed animal tightly to his chest.

"Henry!"

Wilbur, also roused from his nap, rubbed his eyes and frowned.

"Did you beat someone up?" He asked, and it was hard to judge whether he was serious or just joking.

Because Phil himself looked as if both options were very likely, much calmer and tired, but still radiating determination.

"Sadly no," he replied, without taking his eyes off the child, who was checking every possible angle to see if his friend had accidentally been injured. "I just... had a little chat with some people. Nobody will tell my sons what they can and cannot play with."

Tommy froze for a moment, looking up at him sleepily.

"I'm your son too?"

He sounded so quiet and insecure that even Techno, while still not quite comfortable with the fact, wanted to immediately give him the reassurance he so needed. But Phil was much better at it, and it was their moment, as private as it could be.

"You are," he confirmed, smiling fondly as he ran his fingers through his fair hair. "Of course you are."

It was still weird to hear it. It was weird to think that Tommy was really staying, that the 'moment' would never end, that there would be no phone call from Sam, that this was their new standard that they had to learn to live by. Techno was almost ashamed of the fact that deep down he still missed the times when their home was much quieter and more peaceful, and he knew exactly where he belonged and what role he held.

But Tommy's eyes glazed over, and his smile was a little too sincere, and he almost threw himself into Phil's arms with a little too much desperation for anyone to say that all these changes hadn't gotten really damn good.

* * *

Techno cried in his fourth meeting with Puffy. He couldn't really tell when or why he had started exactly, but when he left her office his cheeks were wet, his eyes stung furiously, and he didn't even have the strength to rub them.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said dryly as soon as he got into the car.

Phil frowned, the anxiety on his face turning to sadness, but he nodded and handed him the bag without saying a word. Techno was sure that the special treatment was a one-off, and he was only entitled the first time, like the 'brave patient' sticker Tommy had gotten from the dentist. But his favorite food was still waiting for him after each session, and it was starting to slip into some strange little tradition.

Usually, the mere sight of it made him warm and smile, even though he was extremely tired and not at all hungry. Usually, he just knew that Phil was trying to show that he cared and supported him no matter what. But today he was embittered, and he felt a vague regret in his chest, so he barely glanced at the package before tossing it casually on the dashboard and tucked his knees under his chin, crouching as much as the belt would allow him. And perhaps he had deliberately put his dirty shoes on the seat as if he were doing it to spite anyone but himself.

"Let's go home," he muttered, burying his head in his arms, trying to keep his own voice under control. He didn't even count on controlling his own emotions.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Phil uncertainly reaching for the key.

"You sure?" he asked, and for some reason it was extremely irritating, because damn, could he really not do what he was asked for at least once, simply and without any questions?

Techno's hand tightened on the damp tissue.

"I'm crazy, not incapacitated. I know what I want," he growled, and almost immediately as he heard his own voice, he cursed aloud in his mind. Great. Just perfect. He was giving great proof that he was absolutely irresistible and that it wasn't worth wasting money trying to help him at all. Five minutes from therapy, and he destroyed everything already. "Shit. Sorry..." He looked up, but dared not look at Phil, crumpling a tissue in his hands instead. "I didn't mean to, really. It's just... Because we were talking about something bad and now-"

"Techno." Phil cut him off, gently but firmly. "You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to. And you don't have to explain yourself to me. I can't say I know what you're going through right now," he admitted, and Techno finally dared to glance his way, straight into worried eyes. "But I know sometimes it just takes time."

Maybe it was his tone, maybe it was that he smiled like everything was actually fine, or maybe Techno just desperately needed that little understanding and clung to it immediately with such desperation as if his life depended on it. Whatever the reason, his shoulders relaxed a bit, and as he turned his head towards the glass to gaze at the sights he was slowly memorizing, he felt much, much safer.

They had already covered most of the way, and he was slowly mentally getting closer to the vision of Tommy and Wilbur, most likely demolishing the house together. Sometimes it was almost enjoyable to return to a loud, lively home, like immersing yourself in warm water, something familiar and safe. But tonight he hoped he could get away from them and lock himself in the room before the little gremlin caught up with him and tried to convince him to play, or before Wilbur looked at him like he knew everything and knew his thoughts all too well. He needed some peace, a bit of silence, and it was starting to get a little noisy, so he reached into his bag, actually looking for something to do rather than eat. He pulled the first thing out of the bag and was about to tear the paper open when his hands suddenly stopped moving. It took him a moment to understand what had upset him, and even longer to accept the thought that his eyes were suddenly moist and his throat tightened.

Because the chewing gum on his hand wasn't melon. It was strawberry.

If he were ever to compile a list of the most embarrassing moments in his life, crying in the car over the taste of gum would be at the forefront. But he couldn't help when tears stubbornly ran down his cheeks, his hands trembled as he tried to cover his face, and his breath turned to loud, jerky sobs and he couldn't stop. He was tired, he was so goddamn tired and angry and sad and he had a million other emotions in him that he didn't recognize and couldn't name, and none of them had anything to do with bloody melon or strawberries, which he actually liked.

He felt the car slide to the side of the road and stop, but he was too embarrassed to reveal his face.

"Can I...?" He heard and felt a hand carefully touching his shoulder. He flinched and pulled away, shaking his head so violently that he saw dark spots in his eyes. "Ah. I'm sorry."

"I... I just..." he tried to say something more, somehow justify himself, explain that it's nothing that he's just stupid and frivolous and if anyone wants to laugh at him, he has every right to do so. But he couldn't, so for the next few minutes the silence was only broken by his own breathing as he tried to calm down by huddling in his chair while needing someone's closeness and screaming with his whole body against it.

Because he was pathetic. Because he was weak. Because he was making a scene for such an idiotic reason. Because he didn't deserve anybody to feel sorry for him and try to cheer him up, even if Phil was right there and wanted to help and support him.

Because even though Phil still loved him, no matter what, sometimes it was just hard to believe.

He finally managed enough to wipe his cheeks with his sleeve, ignoring the scraps of tissue he was still clutching into his fists.

"Sorry," he muttered, not sure what else to say. "Really- I really don't know why right now-" He shook his head, forcing himself to laugh faintly, very hysterically. "Now you must really think I'm crazy."

He rubbed his eyes hard, and when he opened them again he had a packet of tissues in front of him, which he hesitantly accepted. He glanced at Phil, then looked away when he smiled understandingly at him.

"I never thought of you like that."

Under other circumstances, Techno would most likely accuse him of lying, if not out loud, at least in his mind. But now he was really trying to remember everything Puffy had said and not let his voices drown out his own thoughts.

"I'm so stupid..." he muttered, sniffing sadly. He was beginning to understand why Tommy always used sleeves for this. There was something dramatic about ignoring the existence of tissues and going for the simplest solution.

Phil laughed briefly and a lot less merrily than usual.

"You can't even imagine how many times I cried in the car after therapy," he sighed. "It's perfectly normal and there's nothing wrong with it."

He didn't try to move or touch him, but everything in all his posture, including the way he was leaning a little more towards him, the way he glanced at his hands, made it clear that he had a hard time keeping his distance. Physical contact has always been a way of showing support for him, and Techno sometimes finds himself starting to take the habit from him. Or maybe he just still hadn't made up all the years he hadn't had the opportunity to do so.

"Can you..." He hesitated for a moment, suddenly intimidated for some reason. "Can you hug me? Just for a moment so that I-"

He didn't have time to finish before he found himself in a firm embrace, warm and safe, where absolutely no one and nothing could hurt him anymore.

"I'm sorry," he whimpered, feeling like he was going to cry again. "I'm sorry, so sorry," he repeated, hiding his face in the arm around him. He wasn't quite sure what he was really apologizing for and to whom, but it didn't matter because Phil just let him cry, let him repeat over and over again the same thing until he was out of breath, too tired for it and he just let his emotions take over everything else.

They came home much later than usual that day, and Techno fell asleep almost as soon as he put his head against the pillow.

* * *

He had a nightmare.

He didn't remember it when he woke up in the middle of the night, sweaty, breathless, and still scared, but with his heart beating so fast, how he didn't understand for a long moment where he was, and he was desperately looking for a hiding place, he knew that this time it had nothing to do with ice and snow. It hadn't happened to him in a long time. When he moved in with Phil, the nightmares were almost a routine he had gotten used to over the years and which he was more ashamed than afraid of. But then he discovered that he could actually count on consolation, that he could run down the hall, open the door, and slip under the covers next to Phil or Wilbur where no monster could reach him. And maybe he liked to think he just grew out of fear, even though he knew he was never going to completely forget.

He has forgotten how lost he always felt when he woke up. How strange was the reflex to hide under the bed or in the closet, even if he knew there was no need to do so, that he was safe and no one would hurt him. He was home, he was with his family, he was far from anyone who had ever laid a hand on him. But even repeating it to himself over and over again - he was terrified.

He cringed, pressing his back against the wall and pulling his knees high, hiding his face behind them. He tried to slow his breathing, but it was with extreme difficulty, and before he knew it, the silence of the room was interrupted by his own jerky sobs and sniffles. And then, quite suddenly and sending a shiver down his spine, another sound joined them. A soft, hesitant knock on the door. And once more. And again.

"Techno?" Tommy stuck his head in, glanced down at his feet, and backed up a bit, probably keeping himself within the magic threshold line. "Can I come in?"

At first he wanted to deny him. The list of people who had the right to see him like this was extremely short and he didn't foresee any changes, ever. But then he looked at the boy, in the pale light from the lantern shining through the window, he looked into his large, trusting eyes and decided he didn't care anymore.

Hastily he wiped his cheeks with his sleeve as he sat down on the bed and significantly flopped the mattress beside him. Tommy didn't need much encouragement, he didn't even close the door behind him, racing across the room as if afraid that the invitation would expire at any moment. He slipped under the covers at the foot of the bed and crawled all the way down the length of the bed, finally emerging right next to the older boy, smiling uncertainly.

"You had a bad dream?" He asked quietly, practically lying on his feet, resting his chin on his knees. Techno took a deep breath to calm himself down a bit before nodding slowly. "Oh." The child made such a sad face as if something bad had happened to him. "When I have a bad dream, Phil always hugs me."

Techno shrugged.

"He does," he admitted, sniffing. If he had been a little more alert, he probably would have been ashamed of how pathetic he looks now.

Tommy tilted his head, studying him closely.

"I can hug you too, if you want," he offered, stepping back and spreading his arms wide. "Maybe you'll feel better."

And maybe it was the gesture itself, as innocent and sincere as possible. Perhaps the thought that after everything that had happened between them, the boy was still looking at him with the same trust and clinging to him almost desperately. Or maybe Techno was just very, very tired, and a little warmth was enough to make him lose any control of his emotions. Regardless of the reason, when his eyes fogged again, when another sob escaped from his throat, as he fell almost limp into the arms stretched out toward him, he knew something had snapped inside him. Something he couldn't rebuild anymore, some remnant of an old, very old wall he had built to protect himself from the world.

"I'm sorry..." he whimpered, holding the child tightly in his trembling arms. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Tommy gasped, squirming a bit so as not to be completely strangled, but when the grip finally eased a bit, he immediately patted the older boy on the head.

"It's okay," he said in a very serious tone that he was clearly copying from Phil. The mere thought of it made Techno sniff even more dramatically. "I'm not angry."

"It's not okay at all," he stammered, wiping his face but still holding the baby in his hands. "Nothing is right and I broke everything and I was terrible for you and- and because of me you lived in the basement!"

This time Tommy patted his head a little harder, as if to wake him up a little.

"I'm small, I forget quickly. Come on, don't cry," he asked. "Don't be like Wilbur."

Despite the absurdity of the situation, Techno couldn't help but burst out laughing. Then he immediately stiffened as he heard from somewhere to the side:

"Hey. I heard that."

He straightened up, finally letting Tommy breathe fully, instead focusing on his brother standing in the ajar door. Though his expression was a little grumpy, as if he was actually annoyed by the comment, he was twisting his arms behind his back, nervously rubbing one bare foot against the other. He was silent for a moment, as if waiting to be asked to leave, and when the silence began to get uncomfortable, he frowned and walked over to the bed.

"Move," he instructed Tommy, pulling the covers off him, which was met with a scream of displeasure. "Come on, I want to come in here too."

The boy made more room for him, but he was definitely not thrilled about it.

"But you always take all of quilt!"

"Do you want to sleep on the floor?"

Eventually, after a brief scuffle full of threats and kicks, Tommy landed on the pillow, squeezed between the two brothers, but clearly pleased with it. He pulled the quilt up to his chin, clenching his hands around it to make sure it would not be taken from him, but his grip quickly relaxed, his breathing slowed, and after a short fight with his heavy eyelids, he finally fell asleep.

Techno watched him, not quite sure what to do with himself, now that nothing was distracting them anymore and he was left alone with Wilbur, lying on his back, staring at the ceiling on the other side of the bed. Should he say something? Apologize again? Ask why he came here and what are they going to do next?

Before he could analyze each option well, Wilbur rolled over to look straight at him.

And then he smiled, the way he had done before, before it all started to fall apart.

"Hey," he whispered, and even if it sounded absurd, Techno was sure one word was enough to take the invisible weight off his shoulders. It was enough to answer all the questions, it was enough to make everything easier again. It was enough for him to believe again that he had a brother.

"Hey," he whispered back, smiling slightly.

Wilbur clearly breathed a sigh of relief, but his shoulders remained tense and there was a hint of anxiety in his eyes, so when he moved a little higher on the pillow after a while, Techno immediately did the same. Their faces were at the same height, and he was suddenly able to see that his brother's cheeks were as red as his own, and his eyelids were swollen.

"I dreamed you were gone," he began softly, his voice rough and a little hoarse. "That you suddenly disappeared, just like that. And I've been looking for you everywhere, really everywhere, but-" He hesitated, wincing at the mere memory. "But you just weren't there."

Techno waited patiently for some sequel.

"Are you sure it wasn't a good dream?" He finally joked, thinking that maybe his brother was expecting some bigger reaction from him. Even if he did, he was certainly in no mood to joke, because his eyes suddenly moistened, his chin trembled, and he reached out, grabbing the back of the Techno's head and pulling it against him so that their foreheads could touch.

"Don't leave me," he asked tearfully. "Even if you're mad at me. Or if I'm mad at you. Even if I'm so angry that I think I won't stop."

Techno was completely unprepared for this. But somehow, perhaps thanks to years of practice, or perhaps because he would have wanted just such a reaction, he reached for his brother's hand and squeezed his fingers tightly.

"I won't leave."

Wilbur sniffed and stepped back to be able to look at him, alert as if he was trying to find a little bit of a lie. He obviously didn't find anything like that, because he finally relaxed and snuggled a little tighter against the pillow, his eyes softening.

"Why are we so stupid?" He asked, but even though he was smiling there was a hint of seriousness in his voice.

Techno frowned.

"Excuse me," he snorted, trying to prod his knee at Wilbur, which proved extremely difficult with Tommy huddled between them. "Speak for yourself." He made a sharp face, then turned serious too, fingering a piece of the blanket in his fingers. "I don't know," he sighed. "I guess... I guess it was all a bit too much for us."

Wilbur nodded thoughtfully.

"Dad said that too," he admitted. "But that doesn't mean it's not my fault either." He grimaced remorsefully, looking down. "I'm sorry. Really."

Until a few weeks ago, Techno would have accepted the apology and not tried to ask, happy to be given such a chance at all. But a few weeks ago he understood a lot less and was in much worse shape than he was now, when he was finally starting to deal with the mess in his own head. It was good to know Wilbur was sorry. Better yet, hear it from him, in its simplest,

most honest form. But he also needed to understand, and he knew it wasn't going to be really good until they got it straight. Sweeping problems under the rug had made him stumble over them once, and he had no intention of repeating the lesson.

He glanced down at Tommy, but the child continued to sleep soundly, unaware of anything.

"Did I do something wrong?" He asked softly, settling a little more comfortably on the pillow. "Before all this mess, I mean."

He could clearly see Wilbur hesitating, as if trying to find a way around the subject. Eventually, however, he gave up and only sighed heavily, shaking his head.

"No. Not really," he replied, but avoided his gaze. "It's- It's my fault. Because..." He took a deep breath, gathering himself up. "Because I was jealous. Like, really, really jealous. About you and dad and that you do so many things together and all that... And I know it's stupid," he added quickly as Techno opened his mouth to cut in. "Because he also spent time with me and was interested in me, but... But it's... different." He shook his head in frustration. "I don't know if I can explain it to you. It was just that sometimes I could see that when he was talking to you, he was really interested. That you two like the same things. And then he would come to listen to me play guitar and praise me and say he liked it, but... But it wasn't something that interested him. He was glad I have a hobby, but nothing else. You get it?"

Techno wasn't sure. In fact, he was pretty sure he understood nothing at all. But then he remembered how he had felt at the very beginning, when Tommy was just a stranger in their house. How he felt with the thought that the little gremlin could amuse everyone around him and get involved in his silly games, how happy Phil seems to have someone to hug, how annoying it seemed to him, all the jokes that Wilbur and Tommy shared and that he didn't understand.

"I guess?" He decided at last, wrinkling his nose. "I think so."

Wilbur nodded, completely satisfied with that.

"And I don't even know when it started to bother me. I just started to think about it and couldn't stop anymore. I know that I don't like books or the same movies as you, and dad once said that if he locked me in for two days, I would probably chew on bricks just to get out and that's true. But sometimes... Sometimes I felt sorry to come home and see that no one was waiting for me. That you were doing great without me. And sometimes I wondered if if I had been a little quieter you would have noticed that I'm still here at all." His voice cracked and he rolled onto his back, surreptitiously wiping his eyes. Techno was already opening his mouth to reassure him that he didn't need to be ashamed, but at the last moment decided it might be better not to speak. It was much easier for him to get out of his way when no one interrupted him. "And Puffy said I should talk to you about it, but somehow I couldn't get down to it and I didn't know what to say, and it got worse and- and I don't know. I guess I figured it was too late. That it wouldn't change anything. And I was angry. Mainly at myself, but at you too. That I can't be like you. And I think... I think I somehow convinced myself that you're doing this on purpose."

He fell silent, and for a long moment the silence in the room was broken only by Tommy's sleepy breathing. They were not looking at each other, Wilbur staring at the ceiling, Techno watching the child lying between them, the cause of the situation and its greatest victim at the same time.

"You left me," he said finally, drier than he had planned. Because even if he understood, even if he felt sorry for his brother and wanted to hug him and assure him that everything was fine, some part of him was still hurt. The one that remembered how lonely he felt when everyone around him seemed to avoid him, how furious and desperate he was, and how much he couldn't handle everything, and the only person he had always trusted completely had simply rejected him.

And Wilbur seemed to know it perfectly well, for he curled his shoulders up and finally looked at him almost fearfully.

"I know," he admitted, sounding like he almost expected Techno to laugh at him. Maybe that's why he immediately added: "But not on purpose! Really! I mean, because- Because at first I didn't really see that it hurt you. I just liked Tommy and it was fun to have someone who always listened to me. And I think... I think I got a little too attached to him. And you kept reminding me that he couldn't stay, and I guess somehow... I don't know. I guess I thought if I didn't listen to you it would never happen."

He seemed much smaller, his shoulders huddled with reddened eyes and a hand rubbing his cheeks again and again. Techno almost wanted to tell him that he didn't need to go on, that they could just let it all go and start over.

"I thought you didn't want me anymore," he said instead, because he may have matured a bit in the last few weeks, even if he chose the worst possible route to it. "That you don't need me anymore because you have a new brother."

Wilbur's eyes widened and he looked at him almost in horror.

"No!" He squeaked, then lowered his voice. "I was angry with you because-" he grimaced. "Because you called me crazy. But you will always be my brother!"

This time it was Techno who stared at him.

"I never called you that," he gasped, almost indignant at the accusation.

Wilbur looked unconvinced.

"Tommy said you said you weren't going to therapy because 'you're not crazy like me'."

Oh...

Oh.

"Not at all! Tommy!" He grabbed the baby by the shoulders, shaking him vigorously. "Tommy! What did I tell you when you asked if Wilbur was crazy?"

The boy, brutally roused from sleep, blinked, rubbing his eyes with his hands. Techno shook him again just to be sure.

"That he's not?," he squeaked finally, trying to push him away from him.

"And?"

Tommy frowned, thinking hard about something.

"And that I should bite if someone calls him that?"

Techno released his arm, straightening, pleased with the effect. Wilbur, on the other hand, looked very far from satisfied

"That's not what you told me," he muttered, but probably more to himself, considering Tommy fell asleep again as soon as everyone stopped shaking him. He swallowed, exhaling slowly, the irritation on his face replaced with remorse. "Techno... Because I... Because I really thought you were trying to tell him some shit about me. Right after I told you how much it means to me that Tommy likes me and- And I thought you wanted to screw it up." His breathing quickened and he began to blur out his words faster and less coherently. "That you want to take him away from me, like you took dad. I mean, I know you didn't take him, but- but that's what I thought then and- And that's why I started avoiding you and everyone asked what happened, and I said that we had an argument, because I knew they would be on my side, and that was so mean, I know, but I didn't think so at the time and- " He took a deep breath as Techno put a hand on his shoulder. And then another one, and again, calming down a bit. "But then I realized you were really upset and I tried to fix it, I really tried! And I even thought that if I came up with something you also like, maybe you'll start to like Tommy, so I asked for the book. Because I thought that maybe you would choose something for him and join us, because you always liked to read to me, so maybe you will also like to read to him and you'll see that he's not so bad. But I guess you didn't like it..."

Techno wouldn't have been more surprised even if someone at the moment had proved to him with absolute certainty that the Earth was flat after all and was carried on its back by a huge turtle. He supposedly knew that's the thing with disagreements, that the perspective of the other person was completely different, but never before had the evidence of it hit him so hard in the face.

"Oh. Oh..." he stammered, blinking as he tried to recover and shake off the shock. "I didn't know- I thought you were just mean. Because you never cared about books, and suddenly you wanted to read to Tommy... I thought this was a way to show me that he was better than me."

Wilbur held his breath for a moment, his eyes gleaming in the twilight.

"That's why you were angry," he said more than asked. "And you told me to fuck off."

"Yhm... And also... Also a bit that you told him that I'm mean and he shouldn't listen to me, because everyone's sad because of me. I mean, I was more sad than angry, but then I didn't really see the difference. And I know it's true, but... But still."

For a long moment, Wilbur looked as if he were counting every emotion he could imagine, from amazement to anger to acceptance. And it was at the latter that he bent down, and this time it was he who shook the child's shoulder sharply, waking him up again.

"Tommy, what did I tell you about Techno?" He asked, in a tone he couldn't bear to refuse. "Back then, when I told you not to listen to him?"

The boy made a high-pitched noise and narrowed his eyes, yawning widely.

"That he's mean," he replied vaguely, trying to turn to the other side, but Wilbur just shook him harder.

"And more specifically?"

"That... that he sometimes says mean things.

"Because?"

"Because someone hurt him and now he's afraid."

"But?"

Tommy yawned again, fighting his sleepiness with all his strength.

"But he doesn't mean it at all?" He tried and nodded his head immediately, admitting to himself that he was right. "Yes. And that I shouldn't listen to it, because he's not serious."

Techno knew he should be shocked at this discovery. But at that moment he was so tired and at peace with everything that he only looked at Wilbur knowingly.

"Let's put him out the window."

"Head down."

"For the whole night."

Tommy squeaked, clearly not supporting the idea, but since he was soon asleep again, no one heeded his opinion. Fortunately for him, Techno was momentarily a bit too comfortable under the warm duvet to get up and actually fulfill the threat. They will have time for it tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, or in a week...

Wilbur shook his head, and it was evident from the way he looked at the child that he had no plans to let him forget it quickly.

"I can't believe it all went so badly just because Tommy's hopeless at the Telephone Game."

While Techno was fully supportive of the idea of putting all the blame on the child, he still needed to be reassured that everything was okay.

"Not only that," he said, looking at his brother almost expectantly. This, as if reading his mind, instantly became serious.

"Not only that," he admitted, glancing down at their still clasped hands. "I'm really sorry."

"Me too. But I'm not angry anymore, so... Can we just start talking to each other again?" He smiled a little uncertainly. "I missed you."

He should have known that Wilbur would instantly make the face of the mean little gnome he was.

"Awww...! You finally confessed!" He chirped.

Techno immediately regretted that he had not beaten him on the beach after all.

"Piss off."

"I always knew you had a soft spot for me."

"You will have a sore spot when I kick you."

"Ooh, and you think you're so dangerous..."

Techno wasn't sure it was an entirely healthy way to apologize, struggling on the bed until Tommy woke up and started squeaking, dented in the mattress. And even less so, pulling the child out from under the covers and dragging him to the window in agreement to fuel him with fear. Or jumping back into bed and feigning deeply asleep in concert, when Phil looked into the room, disturbed by the noise.

But it didn't really matter, because with his brothers in his arms, Techno dreamed of a wooden cabin in the middle of an ice desert. About crackling fire in the fireplace, hot soup, patter of feet and laughter carried by the wind.

After all, he wasn't alone.

Chapter End Notes

Here! He said he's sorry. Can you all forgive Wilbur now? Please?

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

I worked at this with @Katricia! Pog! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy was more lucky than smart. Though they scared him for the rest of the night and most of the morning, in the end they didn't hang him outside the window, and as an act of grace, they merely put him out on the terrace and forced him to run around the entire garden, in pajamas, barefoot, and hit every puddle along the way. It was hard to tell if he considered it any punishment at all, judging by the way he laughed most of the time and twice purposely tripped into the mud. Phil definitely took it as an attempt to assassinate the cleanliness of the floor, so while Tommy was splashing water on the bathroom floor, Techno and Wilbur ended up with a broom, a mop and a ban on going upstairs before the kitchen and living room shone. They didn't complain much, just a little and more on principle than out of anger.

But when Phil called him into his office some time later, Techno was much less amused.

"It wasn't my idea," he noted at the start, still standing in the doorway. "And it's not fair that I'm the only one in trouble, Wilbur was there too!"

Phil shook his head, pointing to the chair in front of him.

"Nobody's in trouble," he said as Techno continued to stare at him suspiciously, nervously twisting his fingers. He felt a little bad about how stressed he was, even though he knew nothing bad was going to happen to him and hadn't done anything stupid lately. Nothing Phil might know about, anyway. "Just please don't do that anymore. I still can't teach him to use tissues, if he gets sick again, I won't keep up with the laundry." He winced at the mere vision, then smiled again and picked up the colorful brochure lying on the table. "I wanted to show you something."

Techno hesitantly took the piece of paper from him and moved his eyes over it for a moment before he frowned and looked up.

"Fencing?" He asked, as if the photos of people in white overalls and masks didn't speak for themselves.

Phil beamed as if he had just solved an incredibly difficult puzzle. Or he just took the mere lack of immediate resistance as a good sign. The bar was very, very low...

"Beginner classes are starting soon. I called and they still have places, and the studio is close enough to your school that you could take the bus. At the beginning, you could rent all the

equipment, so it will be okay if you get bored after a month. I spoke to the instructor and he seems really nice, I think you might like him."

He was clearly prepared and ready to counter any possible argument against the idea before there were any, so Techno made no attempt to interrupt him, listening patiently and staring at the brochure as if it could contain answers to all the mysteries of the universe.

"You think this will help me?" He asked finally, interrupting Phil's argument that sports are important and allow you to discharge excess energy in a way other than tormenting his younger brothers.

Phil, perhaps a little surprised, blinked, then smiled in the same way he always did when reminding him that he wasn't stupid, much less crazy.

"I think you could have fun," he replied, and Techno finally relaxed his shoulders, allowing himself to sink deeper into the chair's backrest.

It was nice to know that even though he had been causing constant problems lately, Phil still understood that he was human and not a robot in need of reprogramming. Especially when he himself forgot about it at times.

But still, he wasn't going to give up too easily and without even a little bit of complaint.

"I won't know anyone there," he muttered, because if there was anything worse than meeting new people, it was meeting people who could gouge his eye out at any moment.

Phil smiled even wider, if possible. Like a fox when asked if he could guard the henhouse.

"Actually, I think you will." He leaned out, tapping a finger on the brochure. "Dream left it in our mailbox."

Techno raised his eyebrows. He supposedly expected everything from his friend, and yet somehow he was always surprised by the level of his unpredictability.

"Seriously?"

"Yhm. He overturned the garbage can while running away. But he came back to clean up, so tell him I'm not angry."

Techno was sure he wouldn't fail to mention it. Right after he hits Dream on the head for scheming behind his back.

He glanced at the photos again. The more he thought about it, the more the whole idea ceased to seem so absurd to him. He might not be a huge fan of social interaction, but even he was beginning to see that he had to finally start making friends of his own, rather than wandering around like a shadow behind his brother and counting on him being willing to drag him into his pack. He didn't mind a little effort either, the sword looked like something everyone could envy, and the ability to kick Dream's ass was an added bonus.

He looked at the brochure, calculating the pros and cons, and made his final decision.

"And will I be able to stab Wilbur sometime?"

Phil laughed with obvious relief.

"Only if he deserves it." He winked at him, and Techno grinned, knowing in advance that his brother would never get a moment of peace.

"Okay, I can try," he decided. "But I don't promise I'll like it."

"I'm sure you will." Phil ruffled his hair, which was met with a dissatisfied mutter, because Techno had not spent an hour learning how to make a french braid just so that all the work would now be wasted. "Ah, by the way, about your brothers... Wilbur wants to go to the movies tomorrow. Can I count on you to take care of Tommy?"

Techno, still busy making sure his hairstyle withstood the sneaky attack, hadn't even noticed the plural form of the word "brothers" at first. It took a moment for him to freeze, his hands still to his head, too busy analyzing how it actually felt to let them down. Okay, he used to mentally call Tommy that, but when Phil does it sound a lot more... ultimate. Everyone knew the boy would stay, that it was a matter of time before Phil started filling out the adoption paperwork again. But no one was saying it aloud, and everyone was hovering around the subject as if it were some kind of taboo.

Because maybe it really was. Maybe Techno had already caused the family so many worries and problems that no one wanted to risk a repeat. But avoiding words didn't really change anything, and didn't matter, not really. Because whether he wanted it or not, Tommy was going to stay. He was going to be his brother. He probably was one already.

And the more he thought about it, the more he came to the conclusion that he did want it to be that way. Even if somewhere very, very deep in his heart, he still feared it.

He lowered his hands to his knees, staring at his hands for a moment.

"You're gonna adopt him, aren't you?"

Phil didn't answer right away, and when he finally spoke, his voice was soft and careful, as if he was afraid to scare him.

"Yes," he admitted, straightening up in his chair. He looked a bit like he was trying to approach a wild cat and not get scratched to death. "I've spoken to Sam, and if all goes well, we could start the procedure in a few weeks. I was planning to talk to you in a few days."

Techno shrugged.

"You know Wilbur will agree," he said, which was the truth, and they both knew it. It wasn't Wilbur who needed to be persuaded of anything, and he wasn't to be treated as a ticking time bomb.

Phil leaned down, placing his hand on his and squeezing lightly.

"And you?"

Techno would prefer the decision to be made without him. He would rather be put in front of a fait accompli and not have to wonder what he really feels and thinks. Sometimes he had the feeling that everything was so much better and simpler when he had no choice and the people around him would decide for him.

(He knew perfectly well it wasn't true.)

"I guess... I guess I want him to stay," he muttered, his hand tightening on his thigh as his knee started jiggling nervously. "I like him, I really do, and he should stay. Just..." He hesitated, but finally gathered himself enough to lift his head and look at Phil. "Can I talk to Puffy first?"

He wasn't sure that was the right answer, he didn't want Phil to think that he wasn't enough support himself, after all he had done for him. But he needed to talk at last, he needed someone who could look at everything objectively, someone who would explain to him what was happening to him and why he still couldn't forget something that had happened so long ago and didn't matter anymore, what shouldn't matter.

Phil just nodded.

"Of course. Would you like me to make an extra appointment for you?"

"Yeah..." he muttered, looking away, but that didn't prevent him from being pulled into a tight hug. "Hey, what's that for?"

Phil released him from embrace, but his hands still rested on his shoulders.

"I'm just very proud of you," he replied, and the tone alone showed that he was speaking completely honestly. "You've made big progress and you don't even realize it."

Techno really didn't. Moreover, he was absolutely sure that Phil was just looking for an excuse to ruffle his hair one more time and completely ruin his hairstyle. But he wasn't going to say it out loud, and maybe, but only maybe, he even allowed himself to believe there might be some truth to it.

"Does the gremlin know he has to stay with me?" He asked to change the subject. He had his dignity, he wasn't going to spend the rest of the day in this sickeningly sweet atmosphere. Even if it was quite enjoyable... "So that he won't be hysterical again."

Phil immediately stopped smiling.

"Gremlin says he likes to stay with you, cause you let him eat sweets and drink Coke 'until he pukes'."

Techno figured they should have told the kid to run barefoot across the neighborhood after all.

"What horrible slander. Nobody can prove anything."

Phil just shook his head, feeling resigned to the fact that some things just couldn't be changed. Especially Tommy's love for junk food and Techno's indifference to whether or not he'll be sick. But it must be admitted that the child really did seem genuinely excited to spend the evening with him, and he didn't go straight into the kitchen as soon as the door closed behind Phil and Wilbur.

"Play with me!" He demanded, jumping in place and pirouetting with the grace of a ballerina after a stroke. Techno secretly hoped that if he got a little tired at the start, he would become a little easier to bear.

"What game?" He asked, falling on the couch and reaching for the remote, but Tommy immediately blocked his view, still bouncing as if the floor was starting to burn him.

"Something fun!"

Techno rolled his eyes.

"We can play 'who will sit still longer'," he suggested. "Bonus points for keeping your mouth shut."

Tommy puffed his cheeks, clearly not satisfied.

"It's boring." He climbed onto the couch and stood on the back, balancing his arms to keep his balance. "Come up with something fun, or I'll jump on you!"

Techno wouldn't have taken this as a real threat if he had not seen exactly that happened to Wilbur before. He rolled over onto his back, humming dissatisfiedly, and was getting ready to complain when his gaze lingered on the pale hair, tousled as if he hadn't seen a brush in weeks.

He wasn't sure why he hadn't noticed it earlier, maybe he was just denying the memory as something too emotional, or he just had a lot of other worries on his mind, but once he noticed it, he couldn't look away anymore.

"What happened to your hair?" He asked, sitting down, and Tommy immediately slapped the mattress next to him, looking at him questioningly. "It's not pink anymore."

"Ah." The child raised a hand to his forehead and wrinkled his nose. "Because they cut it."

Techno blinked, then leaned out, grabbing the boy's cheeks and examining his fringe. In fact, where he had applied the dye earlier, the hair was cut close to the skin, and very uneven. He felt his stomach tighten, just as anger began to build up inside him.

"Just like that?" He asked, even if he knew the answer well. All too well if anyone would like to know his opinion.

Tommy must have sensed his anger as he looked down and began to squirm nervously.

"Because they said pink is the color for girls, and I'm a boy. And that boys can't like pink because it's weird."

If Techno hadn't been outraged before, it would be about time.

"Bullshit," he snorted, part in defense of the child, part in his own, and was immediately fervently backed up.

"That's what I told them! But they didn't listen to me at all!"

Despite all the anger and bad memories coming back to torment him, Techno couldn't contain a short snort.

"I'm beginning to wonder how you ever survived there..." he quipped, which was neither quite a joke nor really funny, but the boy grinned anyway, as if he had just earned an invisible little scout badge.

And maybe it was because of that smile, mischievous and childish, because Tommy could afford it, allowing himself to be just a kid, Techno felt a sudden surge of sympathy and some strange, vague determination. As if everything in him had suddenly decided that it had to stay that way. That he must protect this child, no matter what, he must make him happy, that he must be safe, that he will have everything that he has always been denied.

Tommy was annoying. He was loud and stubborn and sometimes just plain stupid. But most of all, he was Techno's younger brother. And only he had the right to torment him.

"Hey." He prodded the baby with his foot. "You want to show them they were wrong?"

The boy's eyes widened and flashed.

"So they have a stroke when they see me?"

Techno laughed as he stood up and held out his hand to him.

"Something like that, yeah."

It took a while for him to dig through all the bathroom cabinets to find a half-used tube of dye at the bottom of the last one.

"It's washable," he explained, setting Tommy on a stool in front of the mirror and throwing a towel over his shoulders. "I mean, it will come off after a few days. Wilbur used it once on Halloween because he wanted us to be 'more like twins'."

Tommy, rocking on the stool so much that he was about to fly off him, wrinkled his nose.

"But I want to be pink forever!" He protested, but Techno just shook his head.

"Phil would murder me. Don't complain or I won't dye you at all."

It was impossible to say that the boy would endure the entire process of applying dye politely and patiently. He fidgeted all the time, ran into the room twice to get something super mega important that he had to show right now, and in the end he actually fell off the stool onto the floor. But ultimately his hair was bright pink, almost neon-colored, most likely because

Wilbur had chosen the dye for his own, much darker hair. Fortunately, the child didn't have the slightest problem with it and turned in all directions in front of the mirror to check that no hair was really blonde.

Three hours later, Phil was examining his head just as closely, though much less enthusiastically. He looked like he was about to have a heart attack, still in his jacket and boots, kneeling in the hall in front of the child shifting his legs, so Techno had no heart to even try to scare him that the paint was permanent.

"It will come off," he said, exchanging a knowing look at Wilbur, who was smiling as if his evening had just gotten better. "After a few washes. Or at least it should."

Phil exhaled slowly, closing his eyes and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Why do you want to kill me so badly?" He asked helplessly, sitting on the floor.

Tommy immediately climbed onto his lap and, placing his hands on his cheeks, looked deep into his eyes with a very serious expression.

"Did you have a stroke?"

Phil blinked, opened his mouth, but seemed to decide he preferred not to ask, as he just stood up, picking Tommy up and propping him on his hip.

"Not yet, but you guys are disturbingly close." He looked at each of the sons in turn and shook his head in resignation, but the corners of his mouth twitched slightly in a smile. "I'm getting too old for this."

Wilbur opened his mouth, certainly to compliment him for a glimpse of self-awareness, but Techno kicked him in time.

"Leave him alone," he hissed in his ear. "He hasn't seen the bathroom yet. Failed to wash the dye off the sink."

Wilbur just looked at him, smiling even wider and much more malicious.

"Daaad...!"

Techno threw a coat on his head.

* * *

Phil was true to his word, and monday evening Techno spent in a cushioned chair in Puffy's office, trying very hard to allow himself to be completely honest and not to cry at the same

time. He failed and when he got into the car an hour later, his eyes were wet and his cheeks were puffy, but he also felt much, much lighter and calmer. He didn't get any answers or a way to easily solve all the problems, which he counted on a little against logic, but it was good to just throw everything out of himself and hear that nothing that hurt him so much was his fault. That he had a right to be hurt and insecure.

"I'm starving," he said, reaching for a traditionally made bag, mostly to signal that although he's sniffing, his mood is better than he looks.

Phil relaxed a bit, clearly relieved.

"Nothing unusual. You hardly ate your dinner," he remarked lightly, and Techno rolled his eyes over the burger. He bit quickly and swallowed, almost choking.

"Because I wanted to tell Puffy about something, but I didn't know how she would react and I was nervous," he explained, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. He picked up the habit from Tommy and now couldn't stop it for anything. "But I guess... I guess it went well," he decided, taking another bite, but this time he was chewing much slower, and when he finally swallowed, he set the sandwich down on his lap. "Are you mad at me?:

Phil didn't answer right away, completely taken aback by the question. His fingers were already on the ignition key, but he slowly pulled them back and turned in the seat.

"Why would I be?"

Techno suddenly wished he had kept his mouth shut, even if the question had been on his lips for a long time, and he had been gathering up strength for several days to finally ask it.

"Because..." He began to tear pieces of paper from the bag, grinding them in his sweaty hands. "Because I didn't go to therapy earlier, even though you asked."

With each word, his voice grew quieter, more guilty. He knew he couldn't change anything now, and that of the two wrongs it was better that he made up his mind later than never, but that didn't make him feel any better. Especially when he thought about Tommy, in an oversized yellow sweater, hidden in their basement.

Phil thought for a moment, which was, to tell the truth, a good sign. Techno really preferred to hear an honest answer a hundred times more than a forced assurance that everything was fine.

"I think if you had decided to do this earlier, we could have avoided a lot of problems," he finally said, which was a very delicate summary of a long list of troubles he had gotten into over the past months. "But therapy isn't something you can force someone to do. We've tried that already, haven't we?" Techno winced at the mere memory, but Phil just reached out and carefully tucked his hair behind his ear. "You have to want it yourself. And, apart from that." He tapped his finger on Techno's nose, as he did often with Tommy. "It doesn't really matter what I think. What matters most to me is that you're happy."

Techno himself wasn't sure why he was so anxious to hear it. It wasn't just guilt, but some burning need to prove to himself that Phil was still looking at him the same way. That he still sees his child in him, who maybe sometimes is actually 'difficult' and problematic and maybe needs more time than others, but is also loved and can always count on being understood.

The only problem was that now that he had finally gotten it all, he had no excuse anymore, and he had to at least try to bring up a topic that he definitely had enough not only for a day but for the rest of his life.

He took a deep breath and held it for a moment before he let it out slowly, tearing off another strip of paper.

"I have to..." he began, then shook his head. "I *want* to talk to you about something." It sounded a little more formal than he planned, so he wasn't surprised when Phil frowned and leaned a little more towards him. Immediately, however, he spoiled the whole effect, because when it came down to it, his tongue immediately began to get tangled. "Because... Because Puffy asked why I was so afraid that Tommy would replace me, and when I told her, she asked if you knew about it and I said yes. But then, when I thought about it, we never really talked about it? And I always thought it was because you just know I wouldn't want to come back to it, but it's not your style, not to mention it when Tommy showed up. I mean..." He crumpled the bag in his hands, mostly to find something for them to do. "I don't know, maybe I think about it too much and it's not that important, but... But I thought you would ask about it." He took a deep breath, happy to have at least the introduction out of his head, but immediately felt an unpleasant tightness in his throat at the thought of what was still ahead of him. "Because... You read my file before you took me, right?"

Phil nodded without taking his eyes off him.

"I did," he admitted, and Techno felt a little disappointed. Maybe he was actually just dramatizing? Perhaps no one but him considered it a big deal? But it was important, it was important to him, and he was sure that Phil-

Another piece of paper landed on the floor.

"What exactly did they write about my third family?"

Phil thought for a moment, then shrugged.

"Not much, to tell you the truth. Mostly good stuff." He frowned, remembering something. "Ah. Nate made a note that 'It didn't work'." He grimaced. "Whatever that meant..."

The relief Techno felt was as great as it was absurd. It didn't really mean anything... but he did feel a little better knowing Phil didn't know. That he hadn't ripped that old wound up on purpose or out of recklessness, but because no one had ever told him anything.

"It didn't work," he repeated, almost indifferently, a little surprised at how much the term seems to be both an idiot understatement and a perfect summary. He leaned tighter against the seat, tilting his head back against the headrest. When he closed his eyes, he could pretend that he was talking to himself, and it reassured him a little. "I liked them, you know? They

were nice. And I remember... I remember that when I came to them, it was raining a lot. And my shoes got soaked, and I splashed the entire floor and was afraid they would be angry. Because usually people were angry with me, there was always a reason. But they were nice. I got my own room and they bought me loads of stuff, but what I liked most about it was that it was just me. Before, I always had to share with someone and there were kids everywhere, and there... I felt special, you know? And sometimes they themselves said that they chose me. And I guess... I guess I chose them too, sort of. There wasn't really a competition, though. Nobody has ever been good to me before. But I used to call them mom and dad and I really..." He opened his eyes and looked at Phil, suddenly feeling much, much smaller. "I really loved them, you know? As much as I could. And they said they wanted to adopt me. That I would be able to stay forever and no one would ever take me away and... I was happy, Phil. I was really happy."

He remembered that his mother always smelled of flowers. He helped her look after the garden by digging through the beds and pulling weeds, running to her for praise every time he managed to remove an exceptionally long root. Once she even allowed him to have a single bed for herself and to sow whatever he wanted.

"Potatoes!" He had decided without a second of thought, but apparently dreams had their limits as well, and the vegetables didn't quite fit in with the overall look of the garden.

He chose tulips. He hated their color, but his mother smiled every time she glanced at them. She had long, fair hair, a round face, and large, sparkling eyes. Techno could have sworn he had never seen anyone more beautiful.

He had never felt so loved either.

And maybe that's why he lost his vigilance. Maybe he felt too safe, too accustomed to the thought that nothing would change, that he might forget the past, that no one would ever call him an orphan again and send him to another terrible place. Maybe that's why he hadn't noticed that his parents had stopped mentioning the adoption, that Nate had never shown up to talk to him about it, that his dad hadn't played football with him anymore, and that his mom hadn't noticed that his hair was starting to fall in his eyes and to disturb him. That no one praised him when he got ahead of the class in reading and no one noticed he was neglecting his tulips in favor of a potato, which he had planted in a pot hidden among the bushes as an experiment. Nor did he notice anything strange until one day his parents sat down next to him on the bed, each on one side, as if they were afraid that he would try to escape from them.

They couldn't have children of their own. Techno knew it all too well, because absolutely every member of the extended family, with both grandmothers at the helm, had to express deep regret about it just when he was standing right next to them. Well, they were going to stop soon because a miracle had apparently happened and after years of fruitless efforts, the pregnancy test finally tested positive.

"It's a girl," his mother said, placing her hand on her stomach with the same tenderness with which she had stroked Techno's hair before, tucking him to sleep. "She'll be here in five months."

Techno quickly made some complex mathematical calculations in his head. Five months. He'll be seven years old. A very serious age for an older brother."

"How big is she now?" He asked, watching his mother a little critically, and when she raised her hands to show greatness, he gasped in excitement. "So tiny? But she will grow?"

"Of course," mom laughed as she ran her hand over her stomach one more time, and Techno almost instinctively reached out to do the same.

"Can I?" He asked, before he moved closer. He hesitated, a little intimidated, but finally carefully, as gently as he could, he placed both hands on the rough material of his T-shirt.

He already had many brothers and sisters in his life, more than he wanted, especially all at once. But he never considered them his true siblings, not when most of them appeared and disappeared in completely unpredictable ways, were mean to him, or were an obstacle between him and his eating. He didn't get attached to them any more than they got attached to him. He could easily share a room with five foster children whom he didn't even know by name, and he didn't care a bit about it. But the little sister could turn out to be really cool, and the role of the older brother always felt like a kind of honor. He'll be the wiser one, the one who knows better, the one who has to be listened to, and the one who always knows the answer. He would never let her be hurt, not even a hair from her head would come off until he was on guard! And he will be good to her, as good as possible.

He grinned broadly, swearing he felt something under his fingers, some gentle movement, as if he had her consent.

"Hey baby," he said, trying to mimic the tone adults always used to toddlers. "I'll be your brother, you know?"

He noticed his mother suddenly stiffened, and he quickly removed his hands.

"Did I do something wrong?" He asked, feeling less and less confident with the way his parents looked at each other and their faces instantly serious, as if they had just had a whole silent discussion and came to some unpleasant conclusions.

"Techno." Dad put a hand on his shoulder, turning him gently towards him. "Listen. You know we always really wanted to have a baby, right?" He nodded. Isn't that why he ended up here? "When we decided to adopt, we were sure that there was no chance for us to start a real family. That's why we chose you and we were very happy to give you a home and try to love you." He waited a moment, and this time Techno nodded a little less confidently. He didn't like the word 'real'. About as much as it terrified him to 'try'. "You are a very nice boy and you would be a great big brother. But we never... never wanted more than one child."

Techno unknowingly nodded automatically for the third time. Then suddenly he understood and his eyes widened, feeling something unpleasant somewhere in his stomach.

"But..." He looked at his mother, then a little lower, at her already slightly rounded belly. "But you can't give her back. She- She'll be small. She won't take up much space. She can even

sleep in my room, I'll make room for her!" He jumped out of bed, hurrying to the toy bin to move it aside. "Oh, you can put a cot here! And there-"

"Techno."

He paused at his name and turned slowly, his arms drooping helplessly, the first tears streaming into his eyes. "Let her stay," he asked, a little softer, more despairingly. "There... It's not good there, really. And someone will hurt her."

Dad exchanged a sad but firm look with mom once more before he approached him, kneeling down on one knee in front of him.

"We're not going to give her to anyone. We never meant to," he assured, and for a moment Techno only felt relieved and almost smiled, reassured, before a cold chill ran down his spine.

"But you said..." He frowned, staring at each parent individually, at his dad who helped him with homework and argued him a career on the pitch, his mom, who talked about flowers and who never screamed when he ran home in muddy shoes.

The same woman was staring out the window now, avoiding him.

"We're so sorry, Techno," she sighed, as if it mattered how they feel, how they feel about wanting to give him back, wanting to send him back to the same horrible places he sometimes told them about at night, awake from another nightmare.

Techno shook his head.

"But it's not fair," he said, more to himself, clenching his fists tightly. "Not fair!" He repeated louder, tearing his arm out of his grip. "You *promised!* You said I would stay forever! You can't- You said you *wanted me!*"

His mom put her hand to her mouth, but Techno doubted she was actually crying. And even if she did, he didn't feel sorry for her at all. He didn't want to listen to any explanations, he didn't want to 'try to understand', he didn't want to 'act like a big boy'. He wanted to scream and yell and throw something hard enough to hit the wall and shatter into a million pieces, so that's what he did, until they left him alone, until he tore his throat and completely wasted away. After that, he could only curl up in bed, crying until he finally fell asleep from exhaustion.

Nate picked him up three days later. Techno sometimes wondered if he could have stayed a little longer if he at least tried to get out of bed and eat something instead of alternately crying and staring blankly at the wall. He was unable to look at his parents. He also couldn't stop calling them that in his mind.

When he finished speaking, the car grew quiet. Aside from his own breathing and the occasional sniffle, he could only hear the hum of cars in the distant street, and he couldn't tell if it made him feel more reassured or stressed out. Phil didn't say a word, didn't try to interrupt him, or said anything now, resting his hands on the steering wheel and staring out

the windshield. His face was tense, but it was impossible to read any specific emotion, so when he finally turned to him and opened his mouth, Techno was almost surprised at how much his voice was breaking.

"Techno... I had no idea. If I had known sooner, then- I would *never*-"

He looked like he was about to cry himself and Techno quickly shook his head to calm him down a bit.

"I could have told you," he said, even if he knew he couldn't, not really. "But I guess... It's terribly stupid, but I guess I was afraid that..." He laughed, briefly and more from nerves than amusement. "That maybe you just don't know you could do that. That you can still send me back, just like that. I didn't want to give you that idea." He tried to smile, but he made a little more grimace, and then his chin began to tremble and his eyes became foggy. He wiped it quickly with his sleeve, but it didn't do much, so he just bowed his head, trying to hide his face behind his hair. "I know you're not like that. But sometimes... Sometimes I can't stop thinking about it and... and I get scared." He clenched his hands on the paper bag, which suddenly began to add wet tear marks. "I'm really scared sometimes, Phil. And I don't know what to do."

He found himself in a tight grip before he could bring himself to ask for it. He turned, hiding his face with an arm around him, trying to stifle a sob, but after a few tries, when he felt a hand on his back, he finally let his emotions take over and he cried like he should have done a long, long time ago. Relieved that he finally let it all out, with regret, because the old wounds still hurt sometimes, with the shame that still haunted him sometimes, because maybe he wasn't good enough, maybe he did something wrong, maybe he never deserved to have a real home...

But somehow he had it now, he had a family he loved, he had someone to return to, he had a place to call his own and where he felt safe. And it all still belonged to him, even though he had made one mistake after the other and never knew how to be perfect.

Phil pressed him even tighter against him, rocking him gently.

"If there's anything I can do, *anything*..."

Techno sniffed, trying to even his breathing for a moment.

"Can you say you love me?" He asked, quietly and without thinking, lest he accidentally change his mind. "Like, really love me? And- And that you want me, for forever? And that..." He stifled another sob. "Please don't leave me. I wouldn't be able to... Dad, *please*-"

He felt stupid asking for something so banal and childish, which he had known for a long time and which had no right to change anything. But Phil clearly didn't find it either silly or childish at all, and he understood that sometimes hearing something for the thousandth time is as necessary as it was the first time. And maybe he even knew that sometimes it wasn't about actually making a difference, or about big gestures and strong words. Sometimes it was just about feeling a little better about the here and now, even if it wasn't the best possible condition.

"I love you more than you can imagine," he said, loud and confident, as if to emphasize that this is no secret and he's not ashamed of it at all. "I have no idea what I would do if I lost you. I guess I'd go mad with despair." He pulled back a little so he could meet his eyes, then leaned forward, kissing the top of his head. "I won't leave you. Never. You're my child, and you will always be my child, no matter how much you grow up, or what you do, or how much everything else breaks down. I'm so sorry that something like this has happened to you, and that I never even thought to ask you."

This time it was Techno who leaned out, shaking his head.

"It's not your fault," he said, and seeing that Phil still didn't look any more convinced, added, "You didn't know. You had no way to find out. I didn't have it written on my forehead, did I?" He joked, leaning back enough to reach into his pocket for some tissues. He might like Tommy, but he had no intention of acting like him, he had a remnant of dignity.

Phil grimaced slightly, still holding his hand on his shoulder.

"Actually, looking at how you acted... you kinda did. I should have noticed."

Techno scowled at him.

"You should also rest," he grunted, because if he was worse at anything than accepting support, then it was at comforting others. "And stop blaming yourself for everything. And sleep more."

Phil's mouth twitched slightly.

"The last one would really come in handy," he sighed, leaning back against the seat and leaning his head on the headrest. "Maybe we'll go somewhere on vacation? Some little family trip. What do you think about it?"

Techno thought taking Tommy and Wilbur anywhere would risk their family being banned from life in at least a few restaurants and possibly a hotel as well, but had the strange feeling that they were all fully aware of that.

"I think you'll change your mind when you see my grades," he said with a shrug, only half joking. Even though he had a million more important things on his mind lately, he still felt uneasy at the fact that the end of term was approaching as fast as his grades were going downhill. "I may have screwed up school a bit. Like everything else..."

Phil didn't seem to know there was such a thing as tests and exams at all, but he nodded his head in mock seriousness.

"I will try to remember that this is what I should care about the most."

They spent the next few minutes in silence, recovering and rustling the candy wrappers Techno twisted between his fingers until they melted before he finally remembered what to do with them. His cheeks were dry, his breathing calmed down, and he hoped by the time they got home, reddened eyes would be the only trace of what had happened. Still, he

couldn't shake the feeling that something was still weighing on him, some last, forgotten detail, and when he finally understood what it was all about, he immediately turned in his seat, suddenly grabbing Phil by the arm.

"Can you... Can you tell Wilbur?" He asked, quickly withdrawing his hand and wincing at the sight of the chocolate stains he had left on his shirt. "Because... Because he should know. I think..." He pursed his lips, shaking his head. "I want him to know. Just to... make him understand why I..." He lifted his head, looking at Phil as pleadingly as he could. "Can you tell him? I don't want to talk about it a second time. I know it's been a long time and everything, but- but I really don't like to think about it."

He couldn't believe that after all this, after almost three long years, some part of him still feared that Phil would say no to him. That he could do anything but smile in that loving and understanding way and nod his head.

"Of course. If that's what you want."

Techno's shoulders relaxed, breathing deeply in relief. He closed his eyes, feeling the adrenaline slowly fade away and its place taken by overwhelming fatigue, the kind for which the best cure had always been an evening on the couch, with a movie humming in the background, Phil's hand running through his hair, and Wilbur resting on his shoulder. And with Tommy laughing loudly and commenting on every scene, because it just wasn't in his nature to keep quiet.

"I called you dad."

For a moment he wasn't sure if he really said it out loud, or if he was understandable between one yawn and another.

But when he opened his eyes, Phil was watching him intently, and it was obvious that he understood each word as clearly as possible.

"You did," he nodded, and there was a clear question and some kind of request that couldn't be denied.

Techno bit the inside of his cheek, twirling nervously in the seat.

"I never did that because... Because it always sounded wrong." He explained, twisting his fingers and looking everywhere but to the side. "I mean... The last time I called someone that, it... It turned out that it wasn't worth it. And I guess I just couldn't do it a second time." He felt a bigger hand on his, separating them gently, probably saving some bones from potential fracture. He took a deep breath and, gathering the last of his energy, looked up, looking Phil straight in the eye. "But you were always my dad. Even if I didn't call you that," he said, trying to put all the certainty of the world into it. "And you know... Recently, it even... I even forget that I ever had any other parents at all. That I'm not really yours."

He smirked at his own joke, but Phil's eyes were still on him, still just as serious and focused. And then he put his hands on his cheeks and ran his thumbs over them, and something in his eyes changed, something Techno couldn't name.

"You are as much mine as possible," he said in a low, slightly trembling voice.

Techno really, really didn't want to cry anymore. But he couldn't help but feel his throat tightened, and his eyes were moist against his will.

"Even now?"

"Of course. You're my son, no matter what."

He sniffed loudly, but forced himself to swallow down his tears and at least try to retain his pride.

"No matter what?" He repeated, raising his eyebrows, and Phil laughed, obviously understanding what he had just pledged to do.

"Well, I might be a little angry if I had to visit you in prison," he admitted. "So maybe try to avoid it."

Techno shrugged.

"I can't promise you anything," he said, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. "Wilbur is so annoying sometimes..."

They didn't come back to the topic again. Partly because they were both fed up with emotions and confessions for the day, partly because Dream chose this very moment to send him the longest message in the world and Techno got a bit too carried away by complaining about how sick he would be if he had to hear one more story about what George did this time. Phil advised him honestly to write back that he did not have time at the moment, but he would read the message later. Techno chose the simpler option by sending "K." and considering the topic closed.

The only thing he really regretted was that he didn't get permission for murdering his younger brother. And preferably both brothers, because, as it turned out, the mess in the kitchen was the result of their combined efforts.

"We're making a stew," Wilbur explained as Phil raised his eyebrows as he looked across the counter topped with dishes and leftover ingredients. Some of them were thrown by Tommy to the ground to make room for the snowman-like monster made out of the flour and eggs, which he stubbornly tried to place upright. They both had flour on their clothes and faces, and Wilbur an additional three plasters on their fingers, but they looked very pleased with themselves and the grayish mash bubbling sluggishly in the pot. Techno was absolutely sure he would skip dinner tonight. On the other hand, he was much less certain that it was completely edible and if everyone would end up in the hospital just by inhaling its fumes.

Phil seemed to have had similar thoughts, for he glanced at the pizzeria flyer on the refrigerator before bending down to pick up Tommy and tear him away from the fun.

"I thought you didn't like stew?" He said a bit dryly. "For three years now, if I remember correctly."

Wilbur blushed, as embarrassed as surprised by the reproach. Techno frowned, on the one hand also not expecting such a response, on the other hand having to admit that his brother fully deserved it. And he probably understood it himself, for he hung his head, nervously rubbing one foot against the other, rubbing the flour harder on his socks.

"I was mean, I know," he muttered, then, without taking his eyes off the floor, took a step forward and fell facedown into Phil's shirt, arms around him tightly. "But don't be angry anymore..."

He sounded exactly the same childish whenever he did something wrong and needed to be reassured immediately that no one hated him for it, so it was not a big surprise that Phil immediately put his free arm around him and stroked his back soothingly. But his face was still serious, and there was a hint of determination in his eyes.

"I wasn't angry. But it hurt. A lot," he confessed, wincing slightly. Wilbur looked down at him, eyes wide. "I'm really trying, you know? Even if you don't see it sometimes."

The boy immediately shook his head, clinging to him even tighter.

"We always know," he said, standing on tiptoe so that he could put his arm around his neck. Techno was absolutely sure that he had just forgotten how much he really weighed and is just claiming equal treatment with Tommy. "You're doing great."

If Phil had planned on extending the lesson a little and keeping him guilty, he should have chosen a different strategy. But he'd most likely break no matter how well he prepared himself, because he was always hopeless at hiding that he had a goddamn weakness for his kids.

"Aww..." He beamed all over, resting his cheek on the dark hair and glancing at Techno as if expecting him to join this mess as well. "We have to have family crises more often if that means you're clingy again."

Techno leaned against the table top so he could see Tommy.

"You wanna live in the basement again?"

The child, moderately content to be crushed (and most likely hungry for all attention), immediately smiled broadly, keenly interested.

"I do!"

"Nobody's going to live in the basement." Phil, as always, had to spoil the fun. Old people really had no sense of humor.

"But I want to!" Tommy puffed his cheeks as he tried to break free from Phil's embrace, perhaps not fully aware that he was in danger of a hard landing on the floor. "I want to be a raccoon!"

"I can chase you around the house with a broom, what do you say?"

The boy, for some reason, wasn't interested in such a tempting offer. Or in cleaning the kitchen, but this one wasn't what Wilbur saw as a negotiable answer, and in the end, with lots of screams, he actually almost smacked him with a broom on the head. Techno watched them through the door, leaning comfortably on the couch, not thinking to move and come to their aid. He had much more serious stuff on his mind, because Dream had finally remembered that it would be appropriate to add him to a group chat, so he had a very tangible picture of what his closest friends thought about him.

In the first place, because he was an extreme masochist, he searched out all the messages that announced his imminent death, in which Sapnap definitely dominated. Then, however, as the first excitement subsided (and after taking the first unpleasant twist of the stomach), he concluded that it was actually not as bad as his imagination had previously told him. His friends were mostly more concerned than angry, Dream kept saying over and over that nothing really happened and it was all really his fault, and Wilbur...

Wilbur started the whole conversation with, "Okay, I know this looks bad, but you know he's not like that," and he never let himself be dismissed from this position, and once even threatened that "whoever touches my brother will be punched." Which was a weak threat to anyone who saw his bony wrists, but still impressive.

Techno couldn't judge how much it impressed him and whether it changed anything at all. Because even if Wilbur tried to defend him, his behavior was partly the cause of the whole problem. Okay, he obviously didn't talk about him behind his back and never stopped believing in him, but he was still mean, downright mean at times, and completely disregarded his feelings.

Just like Techno stubbornly refused to see that perhaps, possibly, most likely his brother had his own reasons and the problems he was struggling with.

Maybe they just shouldn't think so much about it. Maybe they should just assume they both did a hell of a lot of stupid things, but in the end most of them didn't matter and the rest of the mess was cleaned up. Tommy was safe and happy. Phil finally seemed to be sleeping more and remembering that he was working to earn his living, not the other way around. Everything else - could have waited until they had more time and energy.

And until you can enter the kitchen again without getting your socks dirty.

Wilbur showed up in his room late that night, a good hour after they should be in bed and at least trying to sleep. Techno didn't even have to ask what happened - it was enough that Phil had locked himself in the room with him earlier and how red his eyes were and his cheeks were swollen. He didn't say a word, slowly closing the door behind himself before he ran across the room and almost threw himself on the bed, right in the middle of the scuffed blankets where Techno was already comfortable settling. He was a little less comfortable when several dozen kilos crushed him into the mattress, throwing their arms around his neck and embracing him so tightly that the line between tenderness and attempted suffocation suddenly became very fluid. But he made no attempt to protest and merely hugged his

brother back, stroking his back as his arms began to tremble and a choked sob came out of his throat.

"I didn't know..." Wilbur raised his head to look at him with large, wet eyes. "Really, I didn't know, you never said and I never thought that- Because if you had said it- I know you didn't have to tell me, but if you did, I'd never- And Tommy-" He sniffed loudly, wiping his sleeve, luckily my own. "I thought you hated him, just like that. And I was angry with you for being mean, and- and I was mean too and-"

Techno patted him on the head a little hesitantly, hoping to drive a little more sense into him.

"It's okay," he said, exhaling slowly. "It's okay now."

And this time - it actually was. He might still feel bad about what happened to him. He might still lie awake at night at times and wonder if he would be happy if things turned out differently. He might still feel bad about the thought that he had once loved someone so much that he mourned their loss for years, even though he knew they didn't deserve it. But he had people around him whom he could confide at any moment, who at least tried to understand, who knew better than him that he had a right to each of these thoughts and emotions, even the less pleasant ones.

He was safe. He was loved.

He was a good person who happened to accidentally do something wrong sometimes.

Wilbur rested his temple on his chest so that the dark curls tickled his chin.

"You wanna talk about it?"

Techno shook his head.

"No. Maybe later, someday... okay?" he made sure, even if he knew the answer in advance.

Wilbur took a deep breath.

"Okay."

His breathing calmed down slowly, his heart beating slower and slower, and as seconds turned into minutes, Techno realized that there was absolutely no reason why he should be treated as a pillow anymore.

"Are you gonna get off me?" He asked and even looking down from above he was able to see a wide, slightly malicious smile.

"Maybe later, someday..." Wilbur hummed, then laughed aloud as Techno rolled over without warning, trying to drop him to the floor. At the last moment, he clung to his shoulder and in the end they both stayed on the mattress, poking each other, giggling and silencing each other.

"I'm not forcing you to do anything," They heard from behind the door and immediately covered their mouths, even more amused. "But if I hear a word tomorrow morning that you are too tired to go to school..."

Wilbur looked up, presumably with a comment about it, but Techno had time to cover his face with the pillow.

"I want to live," he snapped.

But even he didn't really know how to be angry when his brother fidgeted in his sleep for the rest of the night, took all the covers, and was a stupid, annoying self, right where he should always be.

Close.

Chapter End Notes

Here comes the last puzzle about Techno's past!
Hope you're not disappointed.

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Today's chapter is sponsored by Tommy and Wilbur being dramatic af.

Chapter Notes

Yooo! I worked at this with @Katricia! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Winter surprised them a bit. Even though the calendar had been saying December for a good few days, Techno was still bloody surprised when he looked out the window in the morning and came face to face with a thick layer of snow on the windowsill. Wilbur, whom he met in the hallway, yawning and rubbing his eyes, already had flushed cheeks and was shivering slightly, so he must have spent a good few minutes in the open window, but the title of Greatest Lover of Cold and Moisture was undoubtedly Tommy's. The boy ran down the stairs, stamping like a herd of elephants, and before anyone could stop him, he opened the door and ran out onto the icy terrace, defeating it with one slide and, with a loud squeal, falling into the biggest snowdrift. Phil had to catch him and bring him back, very unhappy that he was losing the opportunity to get pneumonia.

"But I want to..." he complained, puffing his cheeks and almost sliding off the chair to the floor in a very dramatic pose.

Phil looked at him and, being as strict and firm as ever, sighed heavily.

"If you eat breakfast quickly, you can play for a while before school," he suggested, and the child immediately straightened and threw himself at the plate with such enthusiasm as if he hadn't eaten in a week. "Hey, hey, take it slowly! You'll choke!"

Techno exchanged a knowing look with Wilbur, swiftly agreeing that even today they would make sure the little gremlin had enough snow behind his collar for his life, and the next two as well. The temptation was just too great.

But when they got home from school, the boy didn't seem to be in a playful mood. In fact, for the first few minutes he didn't seem like anything, because he was nowhere in sight. It was only after they had removed their jackets and wet shoes that the unnatural silence was broken by the creaking of the door and the quick steps, and then something small, wrapped from head to toe in a red blanket, fell on Wilbur with such force that he almost landed on the floor.

Tommy just clung to him even tighter, hugging him tightly around the waist desperately.

"Phil yelled at me," he whimpered in his sweater before anyone could ask what big tragedy had happened to him this time.

Wilbur frowned.

"Phil?" He asked, incredulously bordering on amusement. "At you? What did you do, kill someone and stain the carpet with blood?"

The boy whimpered, softly but dramatically, clearly unhappy that he was not being taken seriously.

Techno, though just as far from recognizing his words as even bordering on what really happened, nevertheless felt a twinge of unease. Phil rarely lost his patience, and even then, the vast majority of his anger wasn't directed at them. The last time he actually looked like he really wanted to yell at them (and skin them right after that), they both nearly lost their fingers setting off fireworks in the living room. And while Techno still found it a bit funny, he also had the feeling that they had deserved more than being sent back to their rooms and having a very serious conversation about safety and stupid ideas.

He found himself staring at Tommy a little too closely, scanning him for any bruises, and quickly looked away. Sometimes he really hated himself for automatically assuming the worst and expecting only bad things for every adult, even Phil.

Wilbur must have noticed how nervously he shifted from foot to foot, for he gave him a quick glance and became a little serious.

"So what happened?" He asked, pulling the blanket off Tommy's head but still not having a chance to free himself from his embrace. On the contrary - whenever he tried, the boy immediately clung to him even more closely, lifting his face and looking at him with large, teary eyes.

"We came home and Phil said I had to wait a while to play because he had to finish something." He reported, sniffing every now and then. "But I was so bored and I had nothing to do and I was lonely and just wanted to see what was so important and- And I spilled my juice."

Techno grimaced.

"On the computer?" He asked, coming to the conclusion that the child was more fortunate than smart after all. If it were his stuff, Tommy would end up hanging upside down from the very top of the stairs.

The boy, unaware of his own happiness, shook his head quickly.

"Just some papers. But I guess they were needed because Phil was angry."

Wilbur stroked his hair with a little more sympathy than before.

"And he yelled at you?"

Tommy's chin trembled, and tears welled up in his eyes.

"Just my name. But he was angry." He gasped loudly, hiding his face again in his brother's sweater. "And then he didn't want me anymore."

If Techno hadn't had the opportunity to personally convince himself that everything Tommy said should be carefully analyzed, subtracted from all the drama, and taken into account the planetary system before any truth came out of the equation, perhaps he would have been more concerned. But since he was still a bit offended about his previous play on the deaf phone, and contrary to what it might have sometimes seemed, he really learned from his mistakes, he only frowned.

"So what exactly did he say?"

Tommy tilted his head slightly to show the world how much he was suffering and how necessary all his attention, care and compassion are at this point.

"That I should go to my room because he has to clean up," he confessed, as if it meant a lifetime slave labor in a quarry. "And- And that I have wet socks so I need to change."

It wasn't entirely clear whether he thought the change of clothes was an incredibly harsh punishment as well, or whether he just wanted to complain, but in both cases it was counterproductive. Techno scowled at him, with the rest of his willpower refraining from slapping him right in the middle of his fair hair, while Wilbur rolled his eyes.

"And then you say I'm the one who always dramatizes," he snorted, moving towards the couch, completely oblivious to the fact that the boy still hanging on him was scrubbing the floor with his feet. Techno poked him on the shoulder to strengthen the message.

"You wouldn't survive in the real world," he said, but because for some reason he apparently had a soft spot for small, roaring gremlins, he reached into his pocket and handed a tissue to the slurping child. "Come on, don't whine," he scolded, trying to sound harsh. It would have been a little better if immediately after Techno sat on the couch, Tommy hadn't turned to him for support and comfort. The temptation to throw him to the floor was great, but in the end Techno allowed him to get on his lap and even patted him clumsily on the back. "Oh, Jesus, stop it. You apologize and it'll be okay."

"But I already apologized! Three times!"

"Then you apologize fourth, what a big deal."

They didn't have time to hear another despairing whimper, because somewhere upstairs a door opened and Tommy immediately squealed loudly, diving under the blanket, huddling beneath it as if the big bulge in the middle of the couch was not supposed to arouse any suspicions.

Phil came down the stairs, clearly tired and not in the best of moods, but far from a terrible monster that has nothing better to do than yell at six-year-olds that make noises and hide in the stupidest place possible.

"Is Tommy here?" He asked, peering at the wet footprints in the hall and wincing slightly but not commenting.

Wilbur and Techno exchanged glances before they both pointed to the slightly trembling bulge with their fingers in unison.

"I haven't seen him." Wilbur blinked innocently, as if he had suddenly lost touch with his own hand. Techno just shrugged.

"Tommy? Who's Tommy?"

Phil raised his eyebrows, leaning in slightly to peer over the back of the couch, but his face instantly softened as he heard a snort from under the blanket.

"I was sure I could hear him here." He sat down on the back of the couch, but made no attempt to drag the baby out of the hiding place. "Well, guess I was wrong. What a shame." He sighed dramatically. "If he were here, I would have told him how sorry I was to scare him. Nothing happened that couldn't be fixed in a few minutes and I shouldn't have raised my voice. Even if he doesn't listen sometimes when I ask for something," he added, a bit more reprimanded, but Tommy must have let go of it as he hesitantly stuck his head out from under the blanket, wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

"So you're not angry anymore?" He asked, clutching the covers in his hands as if he were still ready to dive under it a second time and magically disappear from everyone's sight.

Phil sucked in a breath, clutching his heart in mock shock.

"Tommy! How did you get here?"

The boy chuckled as he tossed the blanket from his shoulders.

"I was here all the time!" He replied, clearly proud of his unprecedented talent and cunning. He went on all fours at the last meter between them and stretched out his hands, clearly satisfied when the request was immediately granted and he was able to cuddle up to Phil on his lap. "So you're not angry anymore?"

"I'm not angry." Phil leaned in to kiss the top of his head, then cupped his face in his hands, urging him to look at him. "But sometimes I have to do something important and focus on my work, so if I ask you to wait a moment, I expect you to do it. Can we make an agreement that you'll be a big boy and play alone sometimes?"

Tommy's face made it clear what he thought about similar deals and how he found them idiotic and illegal. Even so, after a moment's thought and a few dissatisfied grunts, he finally nodded his head.

"But only sometimes?" he made sure, which probably meant that he was ready to make an exception once a year, from a great holiday, and for an appropriate fee. "Okay. But I don't like being alone. I really hate it."

Techno seriously wondered if the kid had an innate talent, or was just smarter than everyone thought, and has already discovered how easy it is to manipulate their guardian by making a correspondingly sad face. Either way, if Phil's heart was still in one piece, it had just softened to the rest.

"I know." He kissed the boy on the hair once more, smiling at him reassuringly. "But I promise I'll be somewhere around all the time."

"And you will never leave me for as long as you did before? I didn't like being without you. Other families are stupid."

Smarter. Definitely smarter. No one could unconsciously use so many perfect words with such good results.

Wilbur must have come to a similar conclusion, for he muttered 'trickster' under his breath, which no one but Techno heard, because Phil was just busy staring at Tommy as if he planned to kidnap him, take him away and never let him go.

"Never again." He assured him, pressing him tight to his chest and rocking it gently. "I'll never give you back to anyone. You're stuck with me, just like those two gremlins."

Over his shoulder, Tommy grinned.

"Gremlins," he repeated, very glad that he had not won the honorable title for once. Wilbur stuck his tongue out at him. Techno would have made a much more eloquent gesture, but at the last moment he changed his mind and lowered his hand.

Phil, on the other hand, laughed, the slightly weird, wet way he always did when one of his kids had just given him an emotional crisis that he was trying to recover from.

"You're the greatest gremlin of them all."

Tommy wrinkled his nose as he moved away from him and puffed up his cheeks.

"Nooo... I'm not!" He was indignant, but before he added anything else, he was already lifted and turned upside down in the air. He laughed, legs swinging and squirming as he gripped the arm that held him tightly. "Phiiiiil..."

He squealed loudly, thrashing even more as he began to get tickled too.

"You are our little gremlin, and there's no way to be angry with you." Phil somehow managed to avoid being kicked right in the nose, but his ears were much less fortunate, attacked by a constant squeal and giggle.

"Phil, Phil, Phil...!" Tommy tried to break free again. "Dad, stop! Stop!"

Phil immediately froze, and it definitely had little to do with a rather sincere request. The boy himself seemed surprised that his screams had any effect. He swung his legs as if to remind him that he was still here, and then he suddenly realized what he said, for he opened his eyes wide and quickly put his hand over his mouth.

"I can't say that," he whispered, looking around almost in fear.

Phil carefully put it on the pillows as he sat down next to him.

"It's okay," he smiled, although it was obvious to the naked eye that he was also a bit stressed. "Now you can."

Tommy tilted his head, confused.

"But you didn't want me to," he observed, moving a little closer, reassured that no one had scolded him.

Phil opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, and finally sighed, apparently giving in to finding the right words.

"I just needed some time, you know?" He said, which explained everything and absolutely nothing at the same time, and it didn't surprise anyone that Tommy grimaced at him as if he had suddenly started speaking in a completely different language.

"But that's stupid," he said. And that was as close to the truth as it was far from it.

"Yhm. Very stupid." Phil leaned in to kiss his forehead.

It's a simple gesture. A little thoughtless, probably. But Techno still felt a part of him, weakening with each passing day but still alive, shouting to save something that was never threatened. His place in the family, his future, a love he had once learned to believe in despite everything he had experienced. Because even if he knew Tommy wasn't his replacement, even if he already saw him as another annoying little brother, even if he understood that his 'forever' meant no end to anyone else's, he was still scared at times.

Phil said no one changes overnight, that everything takes time. And sometimes the waiting was more difficult and tiring than accepting that maybe it would never be good or normal.

But when Wilbur squeezed his hand lightly, looking at him with a concerned and silent question, Techno smiled anyway and nodded, returning the hug.

For just as warm water seemed to burn very cold hands, so kind words and tender gestures seemed almost painful at times. But that didn't mean he wasn't made for them.

But something must have betrayed him (he was probably unknowingly making his "This world doesn't deserve my presence" face, as Phil had once called it) because Tommy clung to him extremely tightly and refused to leave him for the rest of the afternoon. He followed him step by step, interrupted his homework and summarized the plot of his favorite movie through the closed bathroom door.

Even when he was finally out of sight for more than two minutes, he was back soon, smelling of frost, earth smudged on his hands, flushed cheeks, and wet socks.

"Techno, Techno! Come on! You must see it!" He braced his legs, trying not to slip on the panels and drag his victim out of the safe, warm bed. "Come on...! You must!"

The only thing Techno had to do, at least in his opinion, was to refrain from slapping the little annoying flea, but there was no sign of Tommy planning to let go, so with great displeasure he allowed himself to be led down the hall and then down the stairs to the still-ajar door on the terrace. Neither of them had shoes, so jumping through the snowdrifts was unpleasant, though Tommy looked delighted at the sight of a runny nose and bronchitis.

"Look! Here!" Not paying attention to the fact that a second earlier he had almost dislocated his leg, falling into a hole with his foot, he pointed with a finger at the snow-covered bed. His breath steamed, and his cheeks grew pinker with each enthusiastic leap.

Techno was about to tell him to calm down a bit before Phil heard them through the window and scolded them both, but at the same moment he glanced in the direction indicated and froze. He looked again. Then he crouched down, shoving the previously dug snow aside and hauling out a vegetable covered in sand.

"Tommy," he began slowly, still not quite believing what he was seeing. "Where did you get this?"

He brushed away the remnants of snow, revealing three more hidden 'treasures' as the child grew more excited.

"They have grown up! And see how big they are! Now you will definitely beat that idiot over the fence!"

He turned to show his tongue to his invisible enemy. Techno didn't have the heart to tell him he had chosen the wrong neighbor.

"First," he began instead, lifting the vegetable so the boy could see it, "potatoes grow underground, not on the ground." Second, it's winter so they don't grow at all. And third..." He pursed his lips not to laugh. "Those are yams."

Tommy stopped bouncing and tilted his head, staring at him as if he had just spoken in a foreign language.

"Yams?" He repeated, but he must have concluded that he didn't care about this new word, because he smiled again. "But they're red! And when something's red, it's always better! Like cars. Reds are always faster!"

Techno knew nothing about cars, let alone their colors. But he knew the garden, and he could tell when someone had stolen their dinner from the kitchen, rolled it in the dirt, and pretended that nature had suddenly worked a miracle. On the other hand, did it really matter when Tommy was so excited and clearly trying to cheer him up, in his own chaotic way?

"That's amazing. Wow." He cleared his throat, trying to sound serious and like he didn't feel like laughing at all. "I never would have guessed. Thanks for telling me."

Tommy beamed as he lifted his chin high, clearly proud of himself. "Now help me get this home before Phil sees us and kills us."

He pressed the two smallest vegetables into the child's hands, hurriedly picking up the rest himself. Indeed, he had more interesting things to do than listen to a lecture on 'Most heat escapes through the feet' (or through the head if he had forgotten a cap). Tommy followed him home surprisingly obediently, nudging every bush as he went to brush the snow off him.

"Wilbur says I have Phil wrapped around my finger."

Techno rolled his eyes.

"Wilbur should watch his ass with that confidence," he snorted. Then he sighed heavily. "But it's true, you do. It's gonna kill us all."

* * *

Techno didn't like eavesdropping. More specifically - he knew Phil disliked eavesdropping and considered it a nasty habit. Anyway, he didn't really have a chance to do so - he didn't care what Wilbur talked to Schlatt about on the phone, Tommy was far too small for any interesting secrets, and the best thing that could be overheard in front of Phil's door was a series of curses as he got another email with comments on his new project.

Maybe that was why, when the opportunity finally came, he wasn't quite able to resist it - he was just out of practice. Anyway, could anyone really blame him? He hadn't planned anything, just went down to the living room to get a blanket, why would he assume Wilbur was still not in bed at a good quarter past midnight, and Phil not only knew about it, but was keeping him company as well? The two of them stood on the terrace, their shoes unbound, their jackets thrown over their pajamas, their breaths mingling into a single cloud as they talked about something quietly, leaning toward each other and oblivious to the rest of the world.

They looked... suspicious. Not as if they were plotting something wrong or talking about someone behind his back, but rather suspiciously like 'we need to figure out where to hide Christmas presents'. Which was absolutely no excuse, and Techno was fully aware of it as he slipped silently through the kitchen to crouch in the shadow of the cupboards. The first gust of wind sent a shiver down his back, but he nevertheless cautiously leaned out of his hiding place. He was close enough to hear the fresh snow creak beneath Wilbur's boots as he moved nervously from foot to foot.

Phil must have noticed it as well, for he put a hand on his shoulder.

"I really think you should apply," he said, smiling encouragingly. "You're really good."

Wilbur looked unconvinced at all. He just grimaced as he looked away, his fingers drumming softly against the balcony railing.

"You haven't heard me play for a long time," he finally muttered, but if he wanted to be dramatic, he ruined the effect by sniffing loudly.

Phil reached into his pocket for a tissue, never taking his hand back.

"I've heard," he replied slowly, clearly hesitating. "Sometimes when you play in the room, I stand outside the door to listen. I know I shouldn't, but..." He shrugged, clearly embarrassed as if he'd been caught doing something forbidden. "Music is important to you. I also wanted to be."

If Techno had ever had to describe his father with one example - he would have chosen this one. Nothing defined Phil better than the fear that his concern might accidentally harm someone.

Wilbur, meanwhile, wiped his nose with his sleeve, completely ignoring the tissue. He probably didn't even see it, because judging by how intensely he was blinking, his eyes were temporarily too teary to fulfill their function.

"You'll always be important," he assured, his voice fading slightly. "I thought... I thought you didn't care anymore. Because- Because you always have more fun with Techno, and- and Tommy is small and you like him..." He sniffed again, and this time the cold didn't seem to have much to do with it. "And I like him too, and I know Techno is cool, but I wanted- I wanted you to like me too. Just a little."

Phil looked as if he'd been expecting this confession for a long time, yet he was still disappointed that he hadn't been able to deceive destiny after all.

"Of course I like you," he said, and Techno could bet everyone would soon be hearing it completely out of context several times a day, just in case.

And maybe it was necessary, because Wilbur sniffed again, then a second, and on the third he had to wipe his eyes with his sleeve, and he didn't look like he was planning to calm down. Somehow, even though he was almost equal to Techno's height, he suddenly seemed very small and vulnerable.

"You used to like me better," he whimpered, but made no attempt to protest when Phil carefully removed his hand from his face and took it in his own.

"Not at all." He wiped the first tears from his cheeks with his thumb. "I like you more and more every day. I like watching you grow up and learn new things and maybe even get a little smarter." He grinned teasingly, and Wilbur made a strange noise, something between a laugh

and a sob. "But you are getting older and you have always been more independent than your brothers. I wanted to give you more space."

He tucked his hair behind his ear, with that tender, caring gesture he used when they were much smaller, and maybe that was what made Wilbur suddenly lean forward, wrapping his arms tightly around him, as if the distance between them suddenly seemed too great, the air too cold, his own hands too empty.

"I don't want space," he muttered, his face hidden in his down jacket. "I want my dad. Can you come back?"

Even if he hadn't asked for it in such a teary tone, there could only be one answer.

"I won't move a step."

"Even if I'm terrible sometimes?"

"Even it."

"And even if it's all my fault too?"

"Even if all the tragedies in the world were your fault."

Wilbur looked up, smiling broadly.

"I'll remind you if you get angry with me again," he grinned, and Phil shook his head, no less amused.

"Of course you will. I didn't doubt it for a second."

Techno also didn't doubt it. Just as he had no doubts that he should withdraw as soon as possible before the moment could be noticed and spoiled. He'd just made up with Wilbur, he wasn't going to spoil it with mere curiosity. He withdrew from the kitchen on all fours, slipped as silently as he could through the living room and up the stairs, and only behind the closed door of the room did he dare to take a deep breath and allow himself to smile.

And if Wilbur was yawning a little more than usual at breakfast in the morning and a puddle had formed around his boots in the hall, Techno didn't say a word about it.

* * *

Although the weather outside didn't spare them snow and frost, there were more than two weeks until Christmas and Techno really didn't remember sleeping through them at any point.

He also had no birthdays, neither his nor his "twin" ones, and he certainly didn't achieve anything spectacular at school. That's why he didn't quite understand why a flat packaged wrapped in colored paper appeared on his bed, with his name carefully marked on it. He twirled it in his hands for a moment, somewhat expecting that it might explode at any moment or, worse, scatter glitter everywhere, but there was no indication that he had a doomsday machine in his hands. Still, he kept the package at a distance as he carefully stripped the paper from it, and froze for a moment in disbelief as a book slapped the mattress lightly. Quite thick, hardcover, not really deadly.

He carefully picked it up, looked at it from all sides, and when nothing betrayed the magic of fate that had chosen him as the new owner, he did the only sensible thing left in such situations - he burst into Phil's office without wasting time knocking.

"Did you buy me something?" He asked, jumping into an empty chair.

Phil frowned as he pushed the headphones around his neck.

"No? Should I have?"

Techno shrugged, sliding the book across his desk as if it were secret mission files.

"Found it in the room." He explained, watching Phil turn his find over in his hands. "I thought it was from you."

"If I wanted to give you something, you'd know it sooner than I do," he said, which was quite right. "You know I'm bad at making surprises." He started flipping through the book and suddenly froze as he scanned the pages. "Oh, Techno." He smiled slightly. "I think it's from Wilbur."

In a broader sense, this idea was not surprising. Wilbur often brought him more or less valuable things, with a majority of the former, but the gesture counted. Nor was it a secret that Techno liked getting books almost as much as spending hours in the bookstore picking them up personally. But recently so many things had changed in their family that this little glimpse of the old norm seemed damn startling, like an echo from a distance suddenly making itself felt.

"How do you know?" He asked incredulously, leaning a little closer just as Phil turned the book over to show him the neatly printed pages. And a slightly lopsided 'I'm sorry' handwritten at the top of each one. Literally every page - Techno flipped through the whole thing immediately, not entirely sure if he should trust his eyes.

Phil smiled at him, a little amused, a little affectionate.

"You can't say he didn't try," he observed.

Techno, indeed, couldn't. Nor could he say anything else because he was temporarily too busy staring at the book and trying to figure out what he was thinking about it all and why. It was only after a long moment, when Phil carefully put a hand on his shoulder to see if he was still in touch with reality, that he got up and strode out into the corridor without a word, with

a fresh wave of determination and the absolute certainty that he would not retreat halfway this time.

Wilbur was sitting on the bed in his room, but straightened up and took off the headphones as soon as the door opened. Techno didn't bother knocking, immediately dropping the book on his lap and raising his eyebrows.

"For your information," he began sharply as his brother glanced at him with a mixture of astonishment and fear. "I think writing on books is barbaric and next time I'll consider it a declaration of war." He sat down on the mattress, nudging his brother with his shoulder. "What's up?"

Wilbur opened his mouth, then shut it shut and focused instead on twisting his fingers. He was clearly tense, but Techno was relieved to find that the atmosphere between them wasn't as bad as it had been over the past few weeks. It was still a bit awkward, but they both definitely wanted to be here, wanted to talk, even if at times they didn't remember how. As if they were just learning each other and slowly accepting along the way that some things are no longer the same, while others remain painfully familiar.

As familiar was the way Wilbur tried to say something over and over again and gave up every time until Techno squeezed his hand lightly. Only then did he take a deep breath and, returning the hug, slowly exhaled.

"Well, 'cause I... I know that recently it was... different." He grimaced slightly. "And I talked to dad that it was bullshit that he liked me less now than he used to, and then I thought maybe you think so too. I mean, that you think I like you less now. I mean, I hope you don't think so, but if you do, stop." He looked at his brother sternly, lifting his chin as if challenging him to try to have any doubts and see what would happen. But he immediately hung his head, nervously rubbing one foot against the other. "And I really feel stupid for being mean to you lately. I didn't want it to turn out like that, it just got confused and I didn't know what to do after that, so of course I was doing the worst and- And I wanted you to remember that I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

One of the things that surprised Techno the most when he first moved in with Phil was how often everyone in this house apologized. Mostly for things that he never considered worth such big words at all, and which he had always considered the norm until now. Entering a room without knocking, putting things in the wrong place, packing buttered sandwiches for him to school, when he honestly hated butter... It was weird to hear something like this after all the years when people not only didn't care about his emotions, but even deliberately tried to hurt him. As if the world had decided to tease him by waving something in front of him that it secretly wanted so long that he stopped believing that he deserved it at all.

He got used to it over time. With time, he realized that not everything has to be so deep, that some simple gestures are just that - simple, sincere gestures. And maybe, just maybe, somewhere along the way he cried once when Wilbur apologized for eating all the carrots off his plate.

"I think I'm a bad person," he said later, huddled against Phil's side, face hidden in his shirt. The hands sliding slowly down his back froze for a moment before one of them slipped into

his hair, brushing it behind his ear.

"Why do you think so?"

They were sitting on the couch, under a thick blanket, and Techno was pretty sure he was sinking deeper into the pillows with each passing second, exhausted by crying and completely safe in his father's arms.

"Because I want them all to be sorry," he confessed, suppressing a yawn. If he had been a bit more alert, he probably would never have dared say it out loud, but his eyelids were starting to weigh heavily, his muscles loosened, and he could barely hear his own voice. "Everyone who hurt me. I want them to be so, so sorry, so damn sorry that they can't sleep because of it. And I want them to apologize. But I would never forgive them."

Phil's chest rose and fell slowly, and Techno found himself trying to catch his own breathing with it.

"Techno." He felt a hand on his cheek and hummed in displeasure, but obediently raised his head a little. His eyes were teary and everything blurry around him, but he could still tell that Phil was staring at him with the same strange sadness they always did when they mentioned their past. "No matter how sorry someone is, if they hurt you, you have a right to be angry. And you have the right not to forgive him right away. Or never forgive. It doesn't make you a bad person."

Techno shook his head.

"But- But I want to look at them and tell them I'll never forgive them," he confessed softly, wiping his eyes with his sleeve to see a little better, but the old tears were replaced by new ones. "That they would know it and feel so bad, and sometimes- sometimes I imagine it." He sniffed. "And I like that thought."

This time, Phil was silent for a moment before he pulled him against him, hugging him so tightly that he was afraid he would be gone.

"I can understand why." He sighed, leaning in to kiss the top of his head. "You know... I think sometimes them not regretting is even worse than what they did. Because it's like your feelings don't count and you're not even worth remorse. And it's normal to be angry and sad because of it. But such people are never worthy of your time and your feelings. And you don't have to prove anything to them."

Techno wasn't sure he believed it that day. Not even the next one, not a month or a year later. He wasn't sure he believed it today. But when he looked at his brother twisting his fingers as if he really wanted to end up with his hands in plaster, he knew two things. First, Wilbur apologized sincerely and truly regretted it. Second - Techno never doubted that he would forgive him on the spot.

"You missed pages thirty-four and thirty-five." He nodded at the book still in his lap, trying to keep his tone as neutral as possible.

Wilbur blinked, clearly confused.

"What?" He looked between his brother and the book several times before finally picking it up, quickly looking for the right pages. His eyes widened. "Damn. Give me a moment."

He jumped up, probably to fix the mistake quickly, but Techno grabbed his arm and pulled him back down forcibly, hugging him tightly as soon as he was within his reach. Wilbur gasped in surprise, but didn't try to back away.

"I'm not good at all this talk about feelings, so I'll only say it once," he pointed out from above, though in his heart he knew that if he had to, he would have repeated it a million times. And he would most likely die of embarrassment. "You're an idiot. And you piss me off and sometimes you don't think at all and I'm sick of you. But you're my brother and I love you. Even if I want to kill you sometimes."

He could feel his brother's arms loosen, then rise to return the embrace with such determination as if his whole life depended on it.

"Sorry I didn't notice sooner," he whimpered in a tearful, slightly trembling voice, and Techno hurriedly stepped back, letting him wipe his eyes surreptitiously and preserve any remnants of his pride. And maybe because he didn't want to end up with a snotty sweater.

"The list of things I should notice is five times as long," he said with a shrug. Wilbur just smiled in the same way he used to, which made everyone around him a little happier too.

"Love you too."

"Ugh, shut up..." Techno nudged his shoulder, making a disgusted face. "You spend too much time with dad, you're getting soft."

This time, Wilbur laughed completely openly and immediately reciprocated with a slight kick to the calf.

"Read to me," he demanded, moving closer to the wall without waiting for an answer. He lounged back, with the pillow in his lap, and looked at his brother expectantly while he put his heart into re-enacting the scene of a deep tear.

"Well, I don't know..." he muttered, but finally, prompted by another kick, he sighed heavily and sat down next to him, fidgeting to mark his territory. "So be it. But only for a moment."

The moment lasted longer than expected.

But, truth be told, he wouldn't be angry if it had lasted to the end of the world.

Phil: I hate eavesdropping.

Phil in first book: *fucking eavesdropping all the time*

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Ah, yes, there's nothing better than Christmas in spring.

Yoooo! Big POG for @Katricia for helping!

"Tommy." Phil leaned over the laptop, grinning broadly. "Do you know what day is coming?"

The child, so far engaged in rubbing the contents of a marker into Wilbur's forearm, paused for a moment in creating the 'tattoo' and raised his head, frowning.

"Saturday?" He asked, not without clear hope in his voice.

"That too. And besides that?"

This time Tommy thought a little longer, wrinkling his nose as well and unconsciously rubbing his chin with the marker.

"Sunday?" He tried at last, glancing at his brother for support. Wilbur just shrugged, but Techno, whose hand wasn't taken hostage, rolled his eyes.

"Christmas, idiot," he snorted, nudging the boy with his foot under the table and getting a familiar squeak in response.

"You're an idiot yourself!" Tommy lowered himself in his chair, swinging his leg furiously, trying to reach his victim. "And you're very ugly!"

Phil waited patiently for the child to run out of energy, finish threatening his surroundings with imminent death, and accept the fact that he's not a dozen centimeters long compared to the length of the table.

"Christmas," he said, but his smile instantly faded as Tommy just mumbled, 'Oh. I see.' and went back to covering Wilbur's skin with an ink that Techno might have forgotten to mention was indelible. "You're not happy about it?"

The boy didn't even glance at him.

"No," he only muttered, resentfully, as if Phil had personally set that date and maliciously didn't want to just ignore it.

Techno glanced at Wilbur, exchanging knowing looks with him. For someone who would sometimes still wake up hearing screams at night, Phil had quickly forgotten that not all

children in the world grew up believing in the wonderful magic of Christmas and the fat man with the beard riding the reindeer. Some, like the two older ones, had a special dislike of this period of the year for most of their lives before Phil made it a point of honor to clean it up. It seemed he would have to do it again. And, for some reason, he was fucking surprised by it.

"Oh. You don't like Christmas?" He asked, as if Tommy's grumpy face didn't speak for itself. He closed the laptop and pushed it aside, turning the chair around so that he could look directly at the boy. "You wanna say why?"

Tommy didn't want to. Techno could tell by the fact that he was silent for the next few seconds, which was extremely rare for him. But since it was definitely not in his nature to keep secrets, after a long moment of puffing his cheeks and pressing his lips together, he set the marker pen down on the table and crossed his arms.

"Mom always promised we would do something nice," he grunted, but even if he was clearly trying to sound offended, probably at the whole world and all its inhabitants, after a while his tone softened and sadness began to pierce through him more than anger. "And she brought a Christmas tree and I could watch TV and sometimes she would buy me cookies. But then she always drank a lot and slept on the couch, and when she woke up she had a headache and yelled at me that I was too loud. And once..." He hesitated, then shook his head and continued. "I made her a pasta necklace once because Tubbo gave one to his mother, and she was happy. But mine didn't like it and she said the best gift would be if I disappeared. And I was sad." He paused for a long moment before picking up the marker again, this time starting to decorate his own fingers. "This year she must be very happy that I am finally gone," he added much, much more quietly, perhaps more to himself than to anyone else.

On the one hand, Phil looked very sorry for asking anything at all, and on the other, he was trying to convince himself that it was actually a good sign and a step in the right direction. In a way, maybe he was even right. Recently, Tommy started mentioning his family home with less and less longing, but with increasing regret, as if he was finally allowing all his negative emotions and acknowledging that he wasn't being treated as he should. It had its obvious advantages, but it was also tiring at times, and it took a lot of patience that only Phil could have. Even though Techno really understood and knew most of these feelings from his own experience, he couldn't help but get nervous at times when Tommy suddenly became cranky, when he stopped playing halfway because he remembered something unpleasant, when he took offense or got angry for no reason at all. Or when he was deliberately doing something he shouldn't have just to see how they would react to it.

"I think he just checks us," Phil said, when he had barely managed to prevent a murder after Tommy turned one of Wilbur's notebooks into a cutout. "He wants to know if we'll react differently than his mom would."

"I don't give a shit." Wilbur sniffed very dramatically, still pressing the frayed pages tightly to his chest. Techno squeezed his hand, partly to cheer him up a little, partly to keep him from murder. "If he doesn't stop, I'll be five times worse than her."

As damn convincing as he sounded, everyone knew full well that in fact, he would never be able to do it. Not only because he was showing Tommy an hour later how to correctly do the next guitar chords.

Because Tommy trusted them enough to put them to any test at all. Because he believed that they would show him how someone who cares about him should react, someone who would never intentionally do any harm to him.

Techno also had to admit, though he would never have dared to say it aloud to anyone but Puffy, that he liked the new, less naive and perpetually optimistic side of the child a lot more. Even if he was annoying, it was much easier for him to see himself in him than the unsurpassed embodiment of perfection waiting just for the right moment to take his place.

But no matter how healthy these kinds of confessions might be for a longer run, each of them obviously made Phil not only a few years older, but also likely to look forward to his own death.

"You know..." He let out a slow breath, moving the chair a little closer and leaning in so he could look straight into the kid's pouting face. "I don't know your mother, but I can promise you that I am very happy that you will be with us for Christmas."

Tommy glared at him suspiciously, but his expression quickly softened and his eyes flashed.

"Really?" He made sure, immediately climbing Phil's lap as soon as he stretched out his arms invitingly.

"Really." He kissed the top of his still pink hair, then leaned back to tap the child on the nose with his finger and smile as he giggled. "And you can be as loud as you want. You can't be louder than these two gremlins anyway."

He nodded to his older sons, immediately arousing unanimous indignation.

"We're not loud!" Wilbur protested loudly, which might have been a mediocre way to prove his point.

Phil just grimaced as he stood, Tommy still in his arms.

"Wilbur, you argued with me last year to let you sled down the roof to make Dream, and I quote, 'shit himself out of jealousy'."

Techno snorted at the mere mention. Wilbur gave him a warning kick in the ankle, chin lifted proudly.

"It was a very good idea," he said with an utter conviction that even Phil's stern gaze couldn't break.

"For a suicide, I think," he snapped firmly, tossing Tommy in his arms before setting him down. "Come on! Get dressed, all three of you!" He ordered, clapping his hands. "We're going to get the Christmas tree. You have ten minutes and not one second longer." He waited a moment, and when no one moved, he raised his hand and dramatically flexed one finger. "One..."

Tommy immediately took off for the stairs. Wilbur, still pretending to be sulky, shuffled after him, leaving markers scattered across the table behind him. Techno threw one of them at him

before scooping up the rest and trudging across the room. He hesitated as he passed Phil, but finally gathered himself to stop and nudge him lightly on the shoulder.

"You're doing well," he said, feeling a questioning look on himself, but not daring to take his eyes off his own socks. "With Tommy, I mean."

He felt a hand gently brushing his hair and finally dared to look up, meeting a gentle gaze.

"You think so?"

Techno shrugged, glancing toward the stairs, from where he could hear a squeal, signifying that Wilbur had taken the bathroom by force.

"I like Christmas now, so he will too," he said with full conviction. And then, just as surely but with much less audacity, he added: "You always know how to make us start to be more... normal."

"You've always been normal," he heard in response, which at the moment was probably more of a reflex, always spoken in the same, slightly scolding tone, as if Phil still believed that one time he would actually be able to get it into his head. Then he smiled, brushing a strand of hair from Techno's forehead. "Thank you." He pulled him close, hugging tightly but firmly. "But you have about nine minutes left, so hurry up."

Techno rolled his eyes but staggered towards the stairs, mostly to keep from missing the moment when Wilbur realized that the colorful marks wouldn't wash away from his forearm. He sensed that it might take a little longer than a few minutes for them to leave the house, if only for this reason, but he wasn't about to spoil the surprise for the others.

* * *

Eventually they arrived at the market nearly an hour later, after Phil had managed to convince Wilbur that scrubbing his skin with a pumice stone wasn't really going to kill him, and Tommy made two last-minute decisions that he still had to go to the bathroom after all. As they got out of the car and onto the cold needle-smelling set, Phil looked like he had plans to personally wrap a rope around his neck and look for the tallest tree possible. He quickly forgot about the existential crisis, however, when Wilbur grabbed Tommy's hand and dragged him into a maze full of Christmas trees, as if they had not been insulting each other in the backseat only minutes before.

"But don't take your caps off!" He called after them, which was completely unnecessary, because both headgear had probably landed in their pockets as soon as the boys disappeared around the bend. "I swear, if they get sick, they won't be looked after."

Techno just rolled his eyes, knowing the value of the threat perfectly well.

They had seen a few of the closest, most promising trees, and he had almost convinced Phil that the nearly three-meter-tall monster would definitely fit into their living room, well, maybe the top would have to be trimmed a bit, before his brothers returned, both with their jackets open and, of course, without their caps.

"Did you find something nice?" Phil crouched down to buckle Tommy up to his chin, without even trying to admonish them.

Wilbur just shrugged, but Tommy wrinkled his nose, clearly displeased for some reason.

"They're all bald," he complained, as if his family had personally stripped the trees from all the pine needles. "And they don't shine at all!"

Phil froze, hands still clenched on his scarf, blinked and slowly looked up at the sulky child.

"They will shine," he explained calmly when he finally understood what the problem was. "As soon as we hang ornaments on them." He pulled his own hat over the boy's head, correctly assuming that his was buried somewhere in the snow. "You've never decorated a Christmas tree?"

Tommy scowled even more.

"No." He crossed his arms, which would have been more impressive if he hadn't looked like a little snowman in his thick, down jacket. "Ours always had ornaments. Mom would bring it from the basement and it was already shining." He looked around and leaned forward, lowering his voice a little. "These ones are shit."

Techno himself looked a little instinctively from side to side to see if any of the sellers were concerned about the horrible insult from the six-year-old, but most of them probably didn't even notice their existence in the crowd of buyers. Phil, on the other hand, focused his attention on Tommy, trying to understand, until comprehension appeared on his face and he laughed as he stood up and held out his hand to the boy.

"You just always had a plastic tree before," he explained. "These are real. Right out of the woods." He pushed the nearest branch back so as to nudge the baby on the cheek. "Have you ever seen wild baubles and chains growing in the forest?" He joked, and seeing that his hand was still empty, he added encouragingly: "We have whole boxes of ornaments at home, you'll be able to choose the ones you like best. What do you think?"

Tommy thought about the proposition for a surprisingly long time, but since he still couldn't take offense or anger a moment, he finally let himself be convinced and grabbed the hand that was extended to him.

"Do you have any red ones?" he asked yet.

Phil looked at him almost fondly.

"Anything you like," he assured.

They chose the ugliest tree possible - Techno and Wilbur agreed on that one hundred percent. It was almost bald and lopsided, and it looked as if it wouldn't even be suitable for lighting a fire in the fireplace, let alone carrying any ornaments. But for some reason Tommy insisted it was perfect and didn't want to even hear it so they could leave it in the square and look for something less dead and nasty. He was ready to scream, stomp and even cry, so after a few more attempts to impress his voice with some common sense, Phil paid for the terrible Christmas tree and stuffed it in the trunk so that the boy would stop squeaking and people around him would stop judge him as a parent.

"But only because it's his first Christmas," Wilbur remarked, brushing the needles off his pants while Tommy, very pleased with himself, blew on the glass and drew patterns on it.

Techno, frankly speaking, just wanted to be at home, and judging by the speed at which Phil started in the parking lot, it was a shared desire. The more so because they had to decorate the lopsided bush so that it would at least pretend to be a real Christmas tree.

Tommy got down to it immediately, snapping up the cartons of ornaments as soon as Phil pulled them out of the closet and immediately getting tangled up in chains and streamers. He didn't stop a bit until he broke the Christmas ornament, one of those large and hand-painted ones that really had value. Frightened, he jumped away from the crime scene and immediately hid behind Wilbur, peering from behind his legs with wide eyes.

"Hey, it's okay," Phil assured him, crouching down to pick up the larger pieces and signaling Techno to fetch a broom. "It happens, it's nothing. You just need to be a little more careful, okay?"

Tommy nodded, relaxing, and he must have taken it to heart, because for the rest of the evening he acted as if each ornament was worth more than their whole house put together. He took them out of the box with the utmost care, carried them in both hands, and made sure they were hanging on a branch before he pulled his fingers back, smiling proudly when no other touched the floor.

"It doesn't look so bad," Phil said, looking at the tree from a distance, correctly assuming that a nice presentation up close is not worth counting on.

Wilbur grimaced as he adjusted the lights Tommy was just finishing hanging on the lowest branches, ignoring those he couldn't reach.

"It looks like a bald rat in a sweater," he said, and while the comparison made no sense, Techno had to admit it was surprisingly accurate.

Phil scowled at him, making it clear that no one should offend their brother's dubious taste for their own sake.

"Nonsense. Looks very nice. Tommy, do you want a picture underneath it?"

Techno immediately withdrew, not wanting in any way to be immortalized anywhere near something so nasty. He sat down on the couch, watching from a safe distance as Tommy happily produced material that could be blackmailed to the public in a few years.

"I want to take a picture too!" He demanded, holding out his hands. "Give me! I want to try!"

Phil hesitated, rightly doubting his phone would survive the fun.

"You know... I have a proposition for you." He crouched down, putting the phone in his pocket, and Techno felt a sudden unease as he pointed his finger at him. "I'll take the old camera out of the closet and you'll be able to take as many photos as you want... if you get Techno to smile in one."

Tommy's eyes flashed, most likely partly for the reward, partly for making his brother suffer. Techno moved a little further away on the couch.

"Look, such a good offer..." he muttered, trying to pretend that he didn't suddenly feel very insecure and cornered. "What a pity that none of this will happen."

Tommy, not a little unperturbed by his words, was already climbing onto the mattress.

"Techno!" He climbed onto the back, avoiding the foot trying to push him away. "Smile!"

"No chance."

"Come on!" He jumped down on the mattress, his feet almost hit his brother's stomach.

"Ouch! You want to kill me?"

"Then will you smile.?"

Techno hummed menacingly, trying to kick the intruder off of himself, and he would probably have won the scuffle if Wilbur hadn't turned out to be a damn traitor and suddenly grabbed his hands, pinning his knees down on his shoulders.

"Tommy." He smiled broadly as only traitors could, and for a moment he paused dramatically before the final order. "Tickle him to death."

"No!" Techno jerked, kicking his legs so ferociously that one blow would most likely kill, but Tommy somehow managed to slip between his feet and a second later he was sitting on his stomach. "When you let me go, I'll kill you!"

"Don't let him go!" Tommy squealed, almost muffled by Wilbur's laugh. And then, since apparently no one in their house was doing anything but cheating on Techno, he grinned and proceeded to attack.

Phil looked damn pleased with his photos. And he better be, because Techno wasn't going to pose for any of them anymore. Never. For the rest of his life. He will pull his hood up to his chin as soon as any lens is aimed at him - he promised at least three times as soon as he broke free from Wilbur and pushed him to the floor.

"Of course you will," Phil said, not taking the slightest bit of a threat from these threats. "I never doubted it."

Techno promised himself that he would never say a word to him again, never in his life. And if it broke a few minutes later, bribed with gingerbread, it was only because Niki brought it and no one resisted her baking. So he was justified.

* * *

On Tuesday night, Wilbur burst home far too happy, even with the vision of the approaching winter break. He had just come back from his guitar lessons, and even if it usually made him feel good, he had never before tossed the case of an instrument on a couch with such verve just to throw himself around the astonished Phil's neck.

"I got in!" He exclaimed, practically jumping with excitement, flushing, still in his jacket and boots leaving wet marks on the floor. "I got in, I did it!"

Phil, trapped in his embrace, for a moment seemed too surprised to answer, but then his eyes flashed, his face lit up with a smile and he grabbed his son by the shoulders, pushing him away to look at him.

"I told you you would!" He ruffled his hair, almost radiating pride. "That's my boy!"

Wilbur rolled his eyes, though he was still almost tapping his feet in place to release the energy somehow.

"Not 'biologically'."

"My sweat and my tears put into raising you are very biological, thank you," Phil cut him short, pulling him into a hug. "It counts. *My* boy."

The two seemed too self-absorbed to even remember that they weren't alone at home, so Techno could only shrug when Tommy, completely forgotten, looked at him questioningly. It was only when the child reached their father's legs, pulling his sleeve to remind him of his existence and loudly demanding that he should be included in the celebration... of whatever it was about, that Wilbur glanced first at one brother, then at the other, blinked and blushed.

"Because..." he began, a little flustered, while Phil took Tommy in his arms and let him embrace him tightly, lest he accidentally forget who he should be focusing all of his attention on. "Because there was a competition. And I wanted to apply, but I didn't know if it made sense, because it's a bit... a bit more serious thing." He hesitated, but took a deep breath and continued. "But dad told me to try and I sent the entry and I had to record how I played and

today I got a reply saying I got in." He grinned broadly, glancing at Phil as if for confirmation that he could indeed be proud of himself. "I mean, to the next stage."

Techno had no idea why he would even be surprised by this. Wilbur has always liked being the center of attention almost as much as he has loved music. Okay, maybe he never said outright that he dreamed of performing in public and always seemed a bit embarrassed when he played for their friends, but he still clearly enjoyed it. As for whether he had talent - after all the hours spent knocking on the wall to remind his brother that some people in their house needed silence to focus, Techno felt almost an expert on the subject.

"Oh." So he nodded, straightening up on the couch and propping his chin in his hand. "So now you're gonna be an artist?"

Predictably, Wilbur was immediately indignant.

"I'm an artist already, fuck you," he snorted, lifting his chin.

Techno rolled his eyes.

"You're a shit, not an artist," he said, but he couldn't hold back a smile any longer. A bit of malice never killed anyone, but he was proud of his little brother, even if he already knew that it was going to his head. "Good job."

Wilbur beamed, blushing up to his ears, mumbling 'thanks' under his breath as Phil was pulling him back to him with his free hand.

"Okay, how about going to the park as a celebration?" He suggested, glancing at each of the sons in turn. "We haven't seen the Christmas tree this year yet. Tommy, you'll like you. Everything shines brightly just as you like."

The child, probably not sensing the light pin hidden in this (their Christmas tree was still exactly as nasty as a few days ago), because he was thinking, very seriously analyzing the offer.

"Okay," he agreed finally, waving his legs to let Phil know he was bored with tenderness and wanted to get back to earth. "But without the cap."

"Without a cap, you won't leave this house." Phil turned to Wilbur once more, cupping his face in his hands and just staring at him proudly for a long moment before following his youngest into the hall. "And don't forget the gloves!"

Tommy forgot the gloves. But it didn't make much difference to him as he ran madly after Wilbur, avoiding people and every now and then disappearing into the dense crowd. Phil tried to keep an eye on him at first, but in the end, when even holding the scarf on a leash didn't work, he must have resigned himself to the idea that some children are just not made to

stand still and look nice. This title went to Techno, who a hundred times preferred to slowly slurp hot chocolate than to have snow on his collar and wet socks.

"You know you won't be any less 'grown up' if you play with them a little?" Phil asked, standing on tiptoes above people's heads to see if his less-grown children weren't lying dead in a snowdrift.

Techno raised an eyebrow, but decided not to rebuke him for just trying to bribe Tommy with sweets, just to stay where he was for more than two seconds.

"I'm having a great time, thank you very much," he replied with dignity, straightening up proudly. And then, a little quieter and less confidently, he added, "But I guess... I don't want to be an adult yet. Not really, you know?"

Phil looked at him, and in the bright light of the lamps his face suddenly seemed much softer than usual. And maybe it was a matter of the frost, maybe that Techno wasn't wearing a second sweater after all, though he definitely should have, but Phil's arms also felt warmer than ever before.

"When I first took you here," he began, resting his cheek on the top of his head, "you asked if you would get any Christmas presents."

Techno, to tell you the truth, didn't remember anything like that. The first months he spent with Phil were so overloaded with emotions that he never expected to find in himself again that as time passed, the days began to merge in his memories and all he could say was that it was the first time in a long, long time, when he was really happy. But, truth be told, he was ready to take his word for it. Sounded like something he would ask.

"I had to take care of my own interests, right?" He shrugged, smiling to himself. "But why do you remember that?"

Phil moved back a little to look at him.

"Because then I thought that despite everything that happened to you, you still know how to be a child. And I was very happy about it," he said, in the same tone he always used when translating something that should have been obvious but never was to them. And then suddenly he turned towards the Christmas tree, so abruptly that Techno flinched. "Tommy!" He ran towards the child, who, with his brother's help, was just trying to cling to one of the branches of the tree and climb higher. "Tommy, leave it, you'll hurt yourself! Wilbur, I swear, if you don't stop making up such silly games..."

Techno watched from a distance as Tommy was dragged to the ground, against his will, judging by the loud squeak, and convinced himself that he was definitely better off in his role of the only calm child. At least until he was literally thrown out of it.

"Techno!" Someone suddenly grabbed his arm and Techno managed to stop his reflex at the last moment and not hit Dream right on the nose.

"Well, hello-," he began, but didn't even finish his word when his friend shook him again, a little harder this time.

He had reddened cheeks, his cap fell crookedly in one ear, and he was smiling so broadly that although Techno had never considered him particularly normal, now he completely doubted his sanity. Before he could question it aloud, however, Dream blurted out:

"George kissed me. Under the mistletoe."

He even had red ears now, or at least the one that was not covered by the cap. For some reason, Techno couldn't help but think that he really should improve it. Not that he had a chance to say something about it, because Dream had already shook him once more, clearly impatient.

"Ah. Uh. That's great?" He tried, which probably wasn't enthusiastic enough, but he really tried!

Dream finally released him, but he was still practically vibrating with emotion.

"And he had to go home already, but he promised to call me," he reported, but when Techno just nodded, he frowned and spread his arms wide. "George kissed me! Me!" He waved his hands as if to inform the whole world about it. Several people turned their heads towards them. "Just pretend to be happy, come on!"

Techno hid his head in his arms, definitely preferring to be anywhere out of the spotlight at the moment.

"Well, I am happy. I said that's cool," he muttered, and when that wasn't enough, he waved his hands in the air with a heavy sigh. "Hey. Well done you. Sapnap may finally stop whining that you are constantly whining in his ear."

Dream froze like an electric shock.

"Oh fuck," he whispered in horror, a smile slipping down his face along with all the colors. "I left Sapnap by the gingerbread house. I was supposed to be back soon."

For the first time since his appearance, Techno wanted to laugh honestly. But he was a good friend, so using all his will, he managed to hold back.

"How long ago was that?"

Dream swallowed loudly.

"It was still light..."

Being a good friend was getting harder every second...

"Then you better go find him," he advised, for which he received an incredulous look.

"Now? Now he wants to kill me!" Dream looked around dramatically as if he expected Sappnap to jump out of the crowd at any moment at him. What could actually be close to the truth. "I have to go." He turned and almost landed on the ground when he bumped into the closest person. "Ouch! Watch how- Oh, hey, Phil!"

"Good evening, Clay." Phil grimaced slightly, which Dream could no longer see as he navigated the crowd to deceive destiny. But at least he finally adjusted his cap. "Do I even want to ask?"

Techno took a sip of colder chocolate.

"George kissed him and now Sappnap wants to kill him," he reported indifferently, knowing full well that everyone would hear the story a million more times as soon as Wilbur knew the details.

Phil must have realized that too, because he made no attempt to ask.

"I just can't wait for you to get tangled up in such drama as well," he just said, shaking his head, seeming to be actually looking for it and being afraid at the same time.

Techno smiled to himself.

"Wilbur will surely run away to get married in secret one day," he said, watching his brother crawl under the Christmas tree, then drag Tommy by his feet.

Phil raised an eyebrow.

"You really think only once?" He smiled bitterly, apparently already gathering strength for it. Then he noticed his children, whom no one in their right mind would ever want to marry, and closed his eyes for a moment. "Wilbur, what was I saying?" He admonished, which only had the effect that both boys ran away a little further, chuckling. "I swear, they're doing everything they can to kill themselves or be kidnapped today..."

"Well, Tommy has experience sitting in someone else's basement."

The chocolate in his mug was starting to turn cold, and despite the gloves his fingers were slowly growing numb, but he had no intention of being the first to ask them to go home. He was never particularly sentimental (or at least he liked to tell himself he wasn't), but he always liked to come with Phil to the park, even when the crowd was a little too thick and the lights a little too bright. Maybe there was some habit in it. In his two previous houses, he tried to spend most of his time outside, and the Christmas market tempted with the warmth of small shops and the smells that made his stomach growling and twisting. Sometimes he managed to steal some gingerbread and he could stand among strangers, admiring the lights and imagining that his real family was somewhere among them.

And maybe it was so. Maybe he had passed Phil once in the narrow aisle between the stalls and hadn't even looked in his direction. Maybe they bumped into each other, maybe they were standing next to each other in the crowd, maybe Techno was seriously considering for a

moment whether it was worth taking the risk and sticking a hand in his pocket in search of anything valuable. Perhaps if he had dared to do so, his life would have been different.

But no matter how much he missed the vague 'maybe', he was finally beginning to slowly come to terms with the fact that it would never come. It won't change the past, no matter how much he asked and screamed and blamed everyone around for having to wait so long to finally get what he should have had right from the start. And even if he still couldn't honestly say that he had accepted this simple fact, Phil's hand on his shoulder, Wilbur's laugh, and Tommy's voice cutting through the general uproar definitely helped.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Guess who got help from @Katricia? I did! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy fidgeted in the backseat of the car, kicking the seat in front of him, sighing dramatically over and over again, clearly very unhappy that no one was paying attention to how much he was suffering from such unimaginable boredom.

"Are we there yet?" He asked for the thousandth time in the last hour, putting his foot into Techno's back so hard that Techno had to restrain himself with all his will to not turn around and hit him back.

"As soon as we stop, I'm going to kick you back home," he warned, sliding a little lower to protect his spine.

Phil smirked as he glanced at the grumpy child in the rearview mirror.

"We're close," he said, also for the thousandth time. "Be patient."

Tommy puffed up his cheeks, sinking into the seat tighter and crossing his arms.

"But you're not telling me where we're going!"

"What kind of surprise would that be if we told you?"

The child scowled at him.

"Much cooler," he muttered, turning his head and pressing nose against the glass.

Outside the window, the forest thickened more and more as they moved away from the city, so the view was not particularly varied, and the fact that it was only eight o'clock in the morning and the sun was just starting to break through the trees didn't add any charm to the area. Everyone was a bit sleepy, Phil was drinking coffee he had bought at the gas station, and Wilbur had somehow managed to curl up into a ball and fall asleep with his cap pulled over his eyes and Tommy whining over his ear. Techno wasn't one of the talkers even at a less barbaric time, so the child was left alone with his monologue and quickly began to look for entertainment in irritating everyone around him.

"Dad, stop." Techno demanded when he was kicked again somewhere near the spine. "Stop, I want to kill him."

Tommy let out a screech that would wake the dead man, but apparently not Wilbur, who just snorted softly. Phil looked as if he were fucking jealous of his selective deafness, but he didn't react in any way. And he certainly didn't hit the brake.

"But you won't leave me in the woods somewhere, will you?" Tommy leaned over to peer at him through the gap between the seats. "Not really?"

He only seemed a little worried, so Techno, as befits an older brother, felt compelled to fix it quickly.

"Oh no, he knows our plan," he sighed dramatically. "Where did we put the rope and sack?"

The boy's eyes widened and his chin trembled slightly.

"Hey, don't say that!" He kicked the chair again, this time deliberately.

"Damn, we could have used the gag as well, it would have been less trouble..."

"Don't scare me!"

"But if you hit him with a shovel..."

Phil closed his eyes, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel.

"Techno, I'm really gonna stop the car," he threatened in a tone that said he was really close to it.

"No!" Tommy didn't seem to understand that he wasn't the one in trouble this time, because he squeaked so loudly that Wilbur jerked his head up, sleepy, confused and very unhappy with his return to reality.

"Are we there?" He muttered, yawning widely. Disheveled hair protruded from the lopsided cap, his cheeks were red, and he looked as if he was about to fall asleep again.

He didn't get the opportunity to do so because Phil exhaled slowly and, to everyone's surprise, nodded.

"We are," he confirmed, turning towards the first buildings in a long time.

They passed the first few houses, Tommy with his nose glued to the glass with Wilbur almost literally panting against his neck as the city thickened around them, people began to appear on the sidewalk, and in the increasingly brighter daylight, the neighborhood began to come to life.

"Where are we?" Tommy frowned, growing more excited now that the threats of being abandoned with wolves began to literally disappear below the horizon.

Phil smiled, exchanging a knowing glance with his eldest son.

"You'll see," he just said as he pulled into the parking lot at the park entrance. "Just a little more patience."

It took a good few minutes for everyone to find their caps and gloves, and Wilbur to stop shivering in the cold, but that was more than enough to arouse the child's curiosity for good and kill his patience.

"Is it a gift?" He asked, jumping up and down beside Phil, slung from his shoulder. "Do I get something? Something nice?"

Phil hummed, mock deep thinking.

"You could say that, yes." He said, then nodded at his sons, who were dragging a little behind them. "It was Techno's idea."

Tommy froze for a moment, his footsteps losing a bit of their springiness. Techno seized the opportunity to catch up with him and lean over his ear.

"We can bury you in the park, too," he whispered, making the most sinister face he could.

The child stared at him and was already opening his mouth, presumably to announce very loudly to the world that it was impossible to kill him in peace and quiet, when Phil tugged lightly on his hand.

"Ah, they're already here." He smiled broadly and crouched down, pointing to the small square surrounded by benches. "Tommy, look over there."

The boy obediently (and probably a little reflexively) turned his head, squinted for a moment trying to find anything interesting, then suddenly straightened and froze, like a deer at the sound of a twig breaking. But this time, there wasn't a hint of fear in his shock, and when he opened his mouth, the sound of them came out with nothing but genuine, boundless joy.

"Tubbo!"

He lunged forward, completely forgetting his family, almost stumbling over his own legs. A bit further, an equally short boy jumped off the bench and, releasing his parents' hands, ran to the meeting, losing his cap on the way.

"Tommy!"

They collided in the middle of the aisle and immediately fell to the ground, straight into a snowdrift, entwined in such a tight embrace that it was only when Techno came closer that he was able to tell the difference between colorful jackets and snow-caked pants. They both screamed at one another so that it was completely impossible to understand them, but they didn't seem to mind at all, because even when they finally crawled out of the drift, there was still nothing else for them but each other.

Phil eyed them with a smile, shaking hands with the other boy's parents and trying to have any kind of conversation with constant squeals and screams. Wilbur leaned back on the nearest bench and pulled his cap down on his eyes, apparently deciding that if he would be

ignored for the next few hours anyway, he might as well go back to sleep. After a short thought, Techno decided to join him, if only to keep him from freezing because of his own stupidity.

"I think he likes it," he said, sitting down on the bench, still watching the boys out of the corner of his eye. When their first shock subsided and their joy took a slightly less destructive form for the environment, they both smoothly switched to summarizing the last months, still far too loud and one over the other.

Wilbur lifted his cap only to get a slightly meaningful glance.

"You *think* ?" He snorted, rolling his eyes. "I told you he was going to piss himself." He yawned widely, pulled his knees up to his chin, and leaned against his brother's side, resting his temple on his shoulder. "Good job."

Techno smiled as he relaxed his shoulders, letting his cheek rest against Wilbur's dark, matted hair.

For the first time in a long, long time, he actually knew he had done something good.

* * *

Finding Tubbo turned out to be much more difficult than Techno assumed. In fact, he didn't know why he thought it would be easy, but somewhere between putting together the whole plan and the first attempt to implement it, he realized that maybe, perhaps, he was too optimistic. He knew the name of Tommy's hometown, that his friend's name was Tubbo, and that he likes bees - damn little information for such an extensive search operation. Techno, however, had something far better than a name or a school name. He had the motivation, enthusiasm, and money for a bus ticket, which he made use of first thing in the morning as soon as he made sure that Phil's car was gone around the corner and Wilbur was too busy talking to Schlatt to notice that his brother had not entered the classroom with him. He didn't realize it until a few minutes later, judging by the messages he sent asking where the hell he was and why he was not in the desk next door, but Techno just wrote back that he had to do something and gently reminded him that snitches ended up very poorly, so they'd better make sure their father never found out about it. He was already sitting on the bus then, admiring the city slowly disappearing from his sight, slowly realizing that he had no idea what his next step should be.

He knew Tommy lived in the suburbs near the park, so after a few internal crises, he dared to ask someone for directions. He had a small nervous breakdown and a panic attack on a snow-covered bench, alternating between dialing Phil's number and changing his mind at the last minute, but finally, a little calmer and redefined, he searched the internet for the nearest elementary school, deciding to rely on blind luck. Of the two bad things, a little exercise

seemed like a better idea than slowly defrosting his fingers. Because of course he forgot the gloves...

He was more lucky than smart. Which wasn't really hard considering he was clearly suffering from a serious shortage of the latter, and he remembered it a good ten times as he stood on the sidewalk outside the school, swinging on his heels and trying to pretend he was exactly where it should be. His fingers had completely ossified when the crowd of children rolled through the main entrance and he could begin the fun of looking for someone he had seen once in the lopsided drawing of his little brother.

And then, just as he was starting to wonder how he was actually planning to come home, and what Phil would say when he found out about it (and he would find out for sure), out of the corner of his eye he saw something small, yellow and black. A bee-shaped backpack with sewn-on wings, on the back of an equally small boy in a dark green jacket.

If he had more sense, he would have thought it through more. If he were Wilbur, with his improvisational abilities to talk to anyone, he probably would have found a slightly better way to start a conversation. But he was himself, in a strange city, he was cold and starting to panic, so as not to chicken out and run away, he did the first thing he could think of.

He walked over the child's path and grabbed his arm, stopping him in place.

"Are you Tubbo?" He demanded and, in retrospect, he had to admit that it might have sounded a bit aggressive. Especially since the boy had to tilt his head to even be able to look at him.

"I can't talk to strangers," he replied, surprisingly calm considering the circumstances, though by the way he glanced over his shoulder at the school, it was clear he didn't like the conversation at all. He tried to avoid Techno, but he only took a step to the side, panicking and grabbing his other hand as well.

He wanted to say something wise and meaningful, he really did. He wanted to assure the child that he didn't have to be afraid of him, that he wouldn't do anything to him, and that he only wanted to do the right thing and make one annoying raccoon happy.

Instead, he stammered out:

"Do you like bees?"

The boy looked at him very appraisingly and turned away, taking a deep breath.

"No no no!" Techno quickly released him and jumped back, hands up. "Wait! Just don't scream!" He said, because the last thing he needed was some alarmed teacher or parent. "I just want to know if you're friends with Tommy. I'm not gonna hurt you, really!" He raised his hands a little higher, a little surprised that his words had actually worked, and the boy closed his mouth, looking at him with sudden interest. "We already had one child in the basement, that's enough for us," he joked, and immediately felt like slapping himself. "No, wait, forget about the last thing..."

Fortunately, the child made no attempt to ask. Instead it tilted its head and watched him in silence for a moment before asking,

"You know Tommy?"

Techno breathed a sigh of relief, maybe a bit too fast, but he never had great stress endurance.

"He's my brother," he confirmed. Then he frowned. "I mean, sort of. I mean, not yet, but he will be. I guess. When my dad adopts him. But he kinda is now, too." He nodded, agreeing with the final version of his explanations, but the boy before him didn't seem to understand too much of them. He was clearly starting to consider calling for help after all, so Techno crouched down in front of him and reached for the phone in his pocket. He ignored five missed calls and at least twice as many messages, all from Wilbur. "Wait..." He found one of the most recent photos of Tommy, smiling broadly, posing under a stick that pretended to be a Christmas tree. He asked Phil to send it to him as an investment in future blackmail. "You see? I'm not lying."

The boy's eyes widened at the sight of the photo. He inhaled sharply and reached out to reach for his cell phone, but before Techno could decide whether he was willing to entrust him with his only chance for a possible rescue, help came from a completely unexpected direction. And not for him.

"Tubbo!" Someone grabbed the child by the outstretched hand and when Techno looked up, he came face to face with a very concerned and damn displeased woman. And while she was afraid for her child, her anger was certainly aimed at someone else. "All good? What's going on?"

Tubbo, his face still frozen in an expression of boundless excitement, pointed with his free hand.

"He has pictures of Tommy!" He announced happily. "And he'll take me to him!"

Techno was sure many times in his life that he had just come face to face with death. But he had never been so afraid of it before.

"No, I didn't say anything like that." He denied quickly, standing up slowly, looking from the boy to his mother. "I didn't tell him that."

Now he was absolutely sure he had found the right child - only Tommy's friend could dig Techno's grave with such a smile.

"Mom, I want to go see Tommy!" He demanded, bouncing in place until the crayons rattled in the belly of a bee clinging to his back. "Can I? Can I?"

In the end, he had to call Phil, because of the two bad things he definitely preferred his father's intervention over the police. Even though he was much more scared of the former's reaction, especially after he almost cried on his phone, repeating hysterically that he would end up in prison. So he spent the next hour sitting on the curb, trying very hard to explain that he really wasn't trying to kidnap anyone, didn't promise anything to anyone, and the only

child in their basement was his brother, but it's a really stupid story and has nothing to do with any of this. When he finally heard his name, he was so happy and relieved that without a second's thought he threw himself into Phil's arms, without even trying to see if he was angry for interrupting his work and forcing him to travel to the end of the world to save a very stupid truant.

As it turned out - he wasn't. Or he just hid it very well. He was much better at choosing words, and clearly didn't look like a kidnapper, because he managed to smooth things up surprisingly quickly and chase away the vision of a poor end in a dark prison cell. Tubbo's mom was very kind once she stopped looking at him as a potential murderer, and the boy himself, even if he was as active and talkative as Tommy, seemed quite nice when he hadn't accidentally tried to get him into trouble.

"It wasn't all that bad," Techno said some time later, after the adults had exchanged phone numbers and Tubbo had been assured a thousand times that they would arrange a meeting with his friend soon. Everyone seemed pleased, no one had been arrested, and even though it could have been done five times better and saved everyone's nerves, the end result seemed to make up for it. And he got free transport!

Although when Phil closed the car door behind him and turned to him with a bloody grave face, Techno figured he wouldn't mind actually walking home by foot.

"Next time you think of something like this," he began, slowly, calmly, and as sternly as never before, "come see me first so I can talk it out of your head in time, okay?"

Techno was nodding his head even before he realized it.

"Sorry..." he muttered, tucking his head in his arms and sliding a little lower in the seat.

Phil just sighed heavily as he turned the ignition key.

"I swear you three will put me in the grave one day. And I won't even know how to be angry with you about it."

Wilbur didn't consider harassing strange six-year-olds morally or socially inappropriate. He had serious complaints, however, that Techno didn't take him along, expressed it loudly and firmly on the first occasion, and perhaps that's why they were both sent to bed straight after supper, as if they were six years old themselves.

Anyway - it was worth it. Tommy has probably never been so happy, which he and Tubbo reported very loudly to the entire area, racing to a nearby playground, pushing off ladders and doing secret competitions, who will have to be pulled from the roof of the slide by a parent more times. The adults, apart from ad hoc interventions in the role of private fire brigades, were equally absorbed with themselves, which was also small, additional victories. Techno knew that beyond a certain age, people had apparently lost their need for friendship for some reason, but Phil was a special case and a remarkable loner in this regard.

"Have you ever seen him talk to anyone other than Bad for so long?" Wilbur asked softly, leaning out on the bench to see better. He was wrapped up to his nose with three scarves, one

of which he had earned by cheating in 'rock, paper, scissors'.

Techno shrugged.

"With Skeppy. Once." He whispered back, though with the noise the children were making, he might as well scream and still not be heard. "When he came to apologize that Sapnap had blackened your eye."

Wilbur frowned, perhaps not quite recognizing the event, before finally grinning broadly.

"Ah... It was actually Karl's fault," he confessed, almost amused, although Techno remembered very clearly that when he sat on the couch and explained himself from the big bruise on his half face, he wasn't laughing at all. "I tripped over Karl's backpack and fell a bit down the stairs. But Sapnap didn't want him to feel bad, so we lied that he threw a pencil case at me."

Techno has once again come to the conclusion that sometimes it's good to not know too much. And that if his brother ever does deal with the mafia, no one will be surprised.

The air was starting to get cold, their breaths turning to steam, and while sharing headphones and staring at the phone wasn't the worst way to spend free time, over time even Wilbur, in his three scarves and stolen gloves, began to complain that he was about to get frostbite on his feet. Techno made a good three attempts to remind adults of their existence and lack of immunity to freezing temperatures, but every time he even came close to the bench, Phil was in the middle of a very lively story about his children, as if the three of them had already won two Nobles and was just working together to devise a way to end world hunger with just a hammer, a dryer and three matches. If it were anyone else, Techno would have thought it was an attempt to obliterate a horrible first impression, but he knew perfectly well (and unfortunately from his own experience) that their father just damn liked bragging about them, even if they didn't usually give him much reason to do so.

It was just as damned certain that if he tried to interfere, he would surely become a living exhibit in a moment, so he would stealthily back off each time, not wanting to risk it. Of the two bad things, he definitely preferred frostbite.

They ate lunch in the late afternoon, in a restaurant where they could never be seen again, after Tommy and Tubbo dove under the table, knocked over the candles, and nearly burned the entire tablecloth. They visited a city with absolutely nothing to see, but a lot of cars under which both gremlins wanted to end their lives at all costs. Techno and Wilbur shared a whole long list of reasons why they would throw themselves off the nearest bridge at any moment, and they stayed and were informed exactly thirteen times that Tubbo really, really likes bees. They had gotten pretty cold before it started to get dark, and Phil made his first attempts to convince the kids that this time they would not be parting for months and that there was no reason to make it so hysterical. One and a half hours, a million 'five more minutes!' and a few nervous breakdowns later, the boys finally embraced one last time, waved goodbye, and Techno was relieved to see the warm interior of the car. Tommy, though his head was

nodding tiredly and he could barely keep his eyes open, almost limp in Phil's arms, still mumbled every now and then something about how stupid everyone is if they think he'll go to sleep now. He will sit until morning and wait for Tubbo to call because he has promised to call and sleep is completely unnecessary and he slept a lot when Tubbo was away and now Tubbo is here, so why would he go to bed at all?

No one had time to answer his serious and almost philosophical question, because when Phil strapped him up in the backseat, the child was already snoring softly, still flushed, with a pale smile on his lips.

"I think I like Tubbo," Phil said softly, peering in the mirror as the boy turned to Wilbur and rested his forehead on his shoulder. "If it makes our gremlin be in bed before seven o'clock, I'll be inviting him at least every week."

Wilbur, just making sure Tommy wasn't planning to drool over his jacket, smiled to himself.

"Maybe you'll eventually have more than one adult friend," he offered innocently, making the face of the polite, helpful boy he never was.

"I have adult friends," Phil huffed, which was as close to the truth as any altruistic instincts of his son.

Wilbur straightened up, lifting a finger.

"Name one other than Bad and Skeppy," he encouraged. Then he added, "Social workers don't count. Neither do our teachers," he brutally stifled another attempt. "Neither do therapists."

Phil closed his mouth slowly, a bit sulky. When he tried to pretend to be offended, he looked surprisingly similar to Tommy. And certainly everyone was taking him equally seriously.

"You discriminate against very important and respectable professions," he grunted defensively.

Techno turned so he could reach his brother and pull his scarf off his shoulders.

"Don't be so happy," he snorted at his triumphant smile. "He only talked about us today anyway."

He didn't even have to look to the side to know what Phil's face was making at that moment.

"Sorry for mentioning something that consumes the vast majority of my time, health and money."

Techno was on the tip of his tongue that his main hobby was waiting to die alone in an empty house before they appeared, but he eventually managed to keep that comment to himself.

"You said I was great at fencing," he said instead, turning up the heat, hoping that amputation of his toes might not be necessary after all.

Phil's hands tightened on the steering wheel, suddenly very focused on the road.

"I might have hinted at something..." he admitted evasively, and Techno figured he might not have spared him after all.

"I was literally in one class. I didn't even hold the sword in my hand."

"Well, maybe not... But you looked very nice in that coverall! It was immediately obvious that you have potential!"

Wilbur snorted softly, then leaned out of the backseat, keenly interested.

"But you said how well I play guitar?"

Techno slapped him on the back of the head, hard enough to hammer into it once and for all that encouraging their father to perform such a show is a crime against humanity. Or at least against their family.

"Sure, and you probably have a band, you go on tour and you signed a million deals," he snorted as Wilbur slipped his cap over his eyes and pushed back into the seat, where he dropped very dramatically and sat there for a puffed up five seconds before Phil turned to him as they happened to be at a traffic light.

"Of course I did," he said, almost tenderly.

Techno concluded that there were many advantages to being an orphan after all, and made a decision to hastily to change that status.

* * *

The meeting of Tommy with Tubbo, despite its obvious and numerous advantages, also had, unfortunately, serious drawbacks, of which two came to the fore. First of all, for the next three days the boy wouldn't sit still even for three seconds, and Techno could hear his cheerful chatter even from behind the bathroom door, when Phil first tried to convince him that yes, bathing was important, and no, no one tried to accuse him of stinking, then get him to put his toys down and get out of the water. 'Tubbo' became the dominant word in the house, usually in the context of 'and Tubbo said', 'Tubbo can do better' and 'but Tubbo would like to play it!'. On the very first evening, Techno had a great desire to strangle the child with his bare hands, and to be honest he was sure that in time even the vision of prison wouldn't dissuade him from it, if not for minus number two.

Tommy mentioned to Tubbo about the letter. And they were both very outraged by the fact that this never reached the addressee.

"So why did I learn to write, if then letters get lost anyway?" Tommy puffed out his cheeks, taking out all the frustration on the carrot and stabbing it with a knife until it turned into mush on the plate. "It makes no sense! I told you that it makes no sense, you didn't listen to me," he looked at Phil reproachfully, as if he personally sneaked into the post office at night to steal random parcels.

Phil just sighed, probably mentally getting ready for the coming hours of homework.

"I'm sure there's some logical explanation," he said calmly, adding more carrots to the child, hoping that at least some of it would actually end up in his belly. "Maybe you haven't got enough stamps?"

Tommy wrinkled his nose as he looked up from his plate.

"Did you put the stamps on?"

Techno, if it were possible, would very gladly melt into one with the chair.

"Mhm..." he muttered, looking everywhere but at his brother. Which, of course, only made him immediately meet Phil's gaze.

Perhaps Wilbur was right in saying that they're very close. Surely they could have a whole silent conversation starting with 'Really?' and ending with 'We'll talk about it later'. He just wasn't sure if it was actually working to his advantage at this point.

"I meant well," he muttered defensively half an hour later, when Tommy finally let himself be calmed down and he and Wilbur ran upstairs to feed Milo. "Well, because he came to me with this letter and he didn't know the address or anything, but he was looking at me like that... And I thought he'd be gone soon, and in most houses you don't have time to worry about something like that because, well, you're busy making sure no one beats you... So I figured he was about to forget."

He should definitely shut up. About a second after he began to speak, judging by the way Phil's faint reprimand gradually turned to disbelief, shock, and finally exhaustion. He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers, the same way he always did when he was suddenly confronted with information without which his life would have been five times easier and his sleep a hundred times calmer.

"Let's say that you meant well," he finally decided. "But please help me convince him now that he has to be able to read because I'm slowly running out of ideas."

Techno had taken the challenge to heart. Partly because of his remorse, because even if the next day they repacked the letter into a new, properly addressed envelope and threw it in the mailbox, he was still a good few weeks late with it. And in part - because one illiterate brother was enough.

"I told you: I'll read the chapter if you get through the first page yourself," he repeated firmly as Tommy looked uncertainly into his room just before his bedtime, in his pajamas, wet hair, and a book under his arm. "I don't accept compromises."

The child, seated comfortably in his lap, wrapped in a blanket up to his neck, groaned very dramatically as he tilted his head and hung limp over his brother's shoulder.

"Well, I have already read it!" He insisted, though he glanced at the book only once, to show which chapter they had finished last, and to tapping a finger expectantly on the page. "But in my mind, so you didn't hear."

Techno withdrew his hand so that the boy slapped softly against the mattress.

"Like shit you did," he huffed, pretending not to see the indignant expression on his face. "Out loud or it doesn't count."

Tommy puffed up his cheeks as he stretched his arms out to the sides and sank harder into the mattress.

"But I don't like reading out loud," he complained, as if he really still believed his whining would work for anyone but Phil.

Techno, at least, was more than immune to it after years with Wilbur.

"I don't like stupid children, so if I were you, I'd do anything not to be one." He made a menacing face, leaning towards the boy and lowering his voice to a whisper. "I can do things you never dreamed of in your worst nightmares."

Tommy shuddered slightly and curled his shoulders, but then regained his composure and made a boisterous face, lifting his chin.

"Not at all." He stuck his tongue out at him. "Wilbur says you bark a lot but you don't bite."

Techno really sincerely regretted that their other brother was now in another room. He was eager to very literally demonstrate to him how much shit his opinions were worth.

"I'd tell you something about Wilbur," he grunted instead, making a note in his head to be sure to kick his brother extra hard at the earliest opportunity, "but dad won't like it if you start cursing."

"I can swear." The child suddenly perked up, sat up and was already opening his mouth to demonstrate the richness of his tongue before Techno put his hand over it.

"I don't doubt it," he admitted quickly, because if Tommy was about to shout 'Fuck!' with all his lung strength, he preferred not to be anywhere near that time. "Read, or go out to your room."

The child grumbled even more, probably partially disappointed by such a brutal restriction of freedom of speech, but after another moment of rolling on the sheets, when the whining had no effect, finally sat down, indented the book and began to sound out new words with a very sulky face, slowly folding them together to the whole thing. Techno would correct him every now and then, or help out with some extremely difficult sentence, but most of the time he just nodded his head, smiled encouragingly, and wondered at what point he started to enjoy it. At what point did he begin to be proud of this loud, annoying child, at which point he began to

enjoy his every little success and feel a tightness in his heart, when the boy finally reached the end of the page and beamed all over as if he had just reached a marathon finish. At which point Tommy's hands began to wander towards his hair quite reflexively, not encountering any objection, at which point the weight of the child resting on his shoulder ceased to bother him, at which point he began to feel that right, covering him with a blanket and observing the corner of his eye as he slowly falls asleep against his side.

At what point did he feel like protesting when Phil carefully picked up the sleeping boy to carry him to his own bed.

It had to happen somewhere in between, between fear and doubt and the belief that there would never be a place in the house for both of them at once. He was probably too busy making one mistake after another to realize that Tommy had long been part of their family, no matter how hard he tried to disavow that fact. Fortunately for him, Tommy didn't really hold a grudge for long and never spoke up against him.

Techno was right to think that his little brother was much better than him. And he couldn't wait to help him prove that he was better than everyone else, too.

Chapter End Notes

Here! Tubbo! Take him!

Phil, answering the phone: Techno? What's-

Techno: Dad, I'm going to jail, I'm sorry, I didn't want to kidnap him...! ;-;

Anyway, 32 chapters up, one more to go! :D

I'll probably add an author's note later, 'cause I'm a sentimental bitch.

Author's note

Hello everyone! I'm gonna update last chapter in like a hour or so, I just need a little more time to get use to it being over. I spent over a year on this fic and every minute I was like "Gods, when will this finally end?" but now that it happened I'm so sad... XD

Big, BIG thank you for @Katricia, this fic wouldn't be good without her. She did a great job and I'm so grateful for it <3

Anyway! About a sequel with Wilbur and Fundy - I really want to write it, just need a little break. So I can't promise any date. But my sister would probably beat the shit out of me if I don't write it, sooo... Yeah... XD

Also! I wrote it in comment once, but since I totally won't write it - here's how a sequel with Kristin would go:

"Phil and Kristin have been together for quite a while now, but he kept it secret, because, well, his kids don't really like changes. He told Techno first, for obvious reasons, and Techno's biggest issue was if Kristin has a kids (or, worse - would like to have a child with Phil). Once assured that no, three kids is definitely enough, he didn't really care much. Wilbur though, was very unhappy, because he doesn't have the best memories with any "mother". And Tommy was like:

Tommy: New mom! :D

Wilbur: We fucking hate her 😡

Tommy: ...Yeah, we hate her 😡

Anyway, they meet Kristin and she's very kind and sweet and Phil very much forgot to mention, that his sons are adopted. So it's like:

Tommy: I had mom once. She didn't like me.

Kristin: ...Oh.

Wilbur: My mom is dead, but my other mother was a bitch.

Kristin: ...Wait-

Techno: My mother left me one night on church's steps and never came back 😞

Kristin: ...Phil, what the hell is wrong with your exes?

Anyway. Tommy quickly get attached to Kristin, Techno still doesn't care too much, and Wilbur hates her with all his guts. And even more once Tommy calls her "mom". So he's trying to get rid of her, and he's really fucking annoying, to the point when even Techno tells him to fuck off.

And then he hears a phone call and from all he could understand he thinks that Phil and Kristin broke up. And at first he's happy, but then he sees Phil, who was obviously crying, and he began to feel guilty. Like, sooo damn guilty.

And he's desperately trying to fix things, so he buys flowers and call a taxi and go to Kristin's house. And he's standing on doorsteps like "I bought you flowers, but I sat on them by accident, and I didn't have money for taxi, but I was crying so much that they drove me here for free, please don't leave my dad, it's my fault, I'm sorry".

Turns out, they didn't break up - Kristin was just leaving for a few weeks and Phil is damn weak, lol. Anyway, they all have a honest talk and it gets better."

It's so weird to see this all done. I'm kinda proud of myself, not gonna lie. Maybe it wasn't the best work in the world, but it was honest and I put my heart into this, and I think that matter.

I had the best readers in the world! Sorry that I sometimes didn't answer your comments, just know I read them all and they give me so much joy and always made my day better. Thank you so much for reading this, thank you for commenting, thank you for being there!

And to those who find themselves in those characters and situations - please remember that you matter so much, you're lovely people and you are loved. Take care of yourself and never give up!

If you have any questions - go for it ;)

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Here it is. It's time.
Last chapter.

And @Katricia! helped me with it!

Techno woke up to quick footsteps and the murmur of muffled conversations in the corridor. He looked up, squinting, but the window was still completely dark outside, and no one knocked to remind him he should get up if he didn't want to be late for school. Soon afterwards, he remembered that Christmas holidays had just begun, so whoever was wandering around the house in the middle of the night was doing it for no reason, illegally and out of sheer spite. One that needed immediate reproof before he fell asleep again and forgot.

He reluctantly pushed his legs out from under the covers, flinching as his bare feet touched the cold floor. Yawning broadly, almost bumping into his own chair, he stumbled to the door to peek out into the hallway, mumbling that someone better be dying.

Wilbur was standing by the ajar bathroom door, leaning against the doorframe, tapping his foot impatiently, repeatedly rubbing his hand over his cheek, which still had a pillow imprinted on it. In the light shining through the narrow slit, he was clearly asleep and dreaming of going back to bed, but when he turned his head to see his brother, he suddenly perked up, almost jumping in place with fear. He put his hand to his chest theatrically, making a face as if he had stopped his soul from leaving his body in the last moment, and was already opening his mouth to speak when the door squeaked softly behind him and Tommy stood there, with disheveled hair, damp cheeks, and a wad of clothes in his arms.

"Wilby, what am I supposed to do with-" he began, sniffing every other word, but stopped immediately as soon as he noticed Techno. His eyes, red and puffy from crying, widened, his cheeks flushed, and he almost leapt at Wilbur, clinging to his back like a human shield.

If Techno had been a bit more alert, he would probably have felt a bit offended by this reaction. Okay, he might have shouted at the child once or twice, but that still didn't make him a monster lurking in the darkness to be so scared of.

(Or at least that was what he kept telling himself to silence his remorse.)

But it was the middle of the night and he was up late reading, curled up under a blanket with a flashlight, so before he could understand the situation well, Wilbur reached back his hand, brushing the hair of the child behind him.

"Relax. Techno won't make fun of you," he assured, then glanced at his brother almost defiantly. "Right?"

Techno was about to ask what was so funny about their secret wanderings in the corridor. But then Tommy slipped out of his hiding place a bit, unsure and ashamed, in the blue pajamas he was definitely not wearing that evening...

Something in Techno's head clicked into place, and he winced slightly at his own memory.

"Ah," he muttered, then shrugged. "I don't see anything funny about it."

Tommy didn't seem convinced at all and just shuffled his legs as he stared at the floor.

Wilbur, on the other hand, relaxed his shoulders and smiled slightly, reassured, clearly devoted to his role as protector of the little and the oppressed.

"You see? Nothing funny, I told you," he instructed in a very serious tone. He picked up the rolled clothes and tried to pull them away, but the effect was that Tommy clung to his arm in panic. "Hey. I still have to change your sheets, go to your room for now."

The boy shook his head so violently it almost made him lose balance.

"But I don't want to be alone now," he whimpered dramatically, lifting his head and resting his trembling chin on his brother's elbow. "Wilby..."

He looked so desperate as if every second of loneliness could turn out to be a death sentence, and while Techno was really trying to remain indifferent to it, deep down he was beginning to accept his weakness for those big eyes.

"I'll take him," he said, surprising himself a little. Both brothers looked at him in no less astonishment, Wilbur raising his eyebrows, Tommy hastily wiping his nose with his sleeve. "Come back when you're done."

Wilbur hesitated, probably unhappy to be dealt a much worse job, but eventually nodded his head as he shifted and pushed Tommy's shoulder a little forward.

"Okay. But my bed," he said. "Yours is too fucking uncomfortable."

Techno just made a face at him, immediately focusing all his attention on the child's still running nose.

"Come on. "He held out his hand to him. "Come on." He waved his hand urgently. "I won't carry you, I'm not Phil. I like to have a straight backbone."

Tommy made a guttural noise, something between a sob and a laugh, and finally took his hand, letting him lead him into the room. His hand was slick with sweat, but he squeezed his

fingers so tightly as if his life depended on it. He moved almost silently, not at all with his usual grace of an elephant herd, and when Techno pulled back the sheets he immediately crawled underneath it and curled into a ball, pressing his back against the wall. He seemed so much younger, so small and vulnerable that it was hard not to wonder how many times he had to wake up at night thinking there was no one he could go to for consolation. How many times has he been left to fend for himself, scared and with no idea how to handle everything, with the thought that no one really cares what he feels or what will happen to him.

Techno couldn't say he understood everything. As a child, he dreamed more often about everyone leaving him alone than about being the center of attention. But he knew all too well how painful it was to know that there was no one really close to him in the world, no one to look after him, no one who loved him and simply cared for him.

And maybe under a thick layer of all his fears and complexes, he knew how to be a good man - because looking at Tommy now, he could only be glad that at least one of them would forget about it all in time.

"Hey." He lay down beside him, arranging the covers so that a pair of wide eyes could be seen just above them. "Just in case you don't know... You really have nothing to be ashamed of." He shrugged, rolling over on his back. "Just saying. It happens."

Tommy just tucked his face deeper into the sheets.

"It wouldn't have happened to you," he muttered, sliding his hands under the pillow and pressing the ends to his ears.

Techno hesitated, but ultimately his love of his own pride lost to childlike despair, and sighing, he rolled on his side, leaning towards the boy.

"Do you want to bet?"

Tommy didn't react for a moment, but finally lifted his head a little, glanced at him as if to make sure he wasn't the victim of a joke, then bit his lip and moved a little closer.

"And Phil wasn't angry?" He asked softly, casting a quick glance towards the door.

"Of course not." Techno frowned, surprised much more with the question itself than that it had only happened now. That it wasn't until now, after all this time together, despite all the evidence, that Tommy had begun to have any doubts. "Why would he be?"

The child began to fingertip the corner of the pillow, pressing his lips together for a moment, before finally taking a deep breath, curling his shoulders.

"I don't know. Mom would be angry," he complained softly and then sniffed to add to the drama. "And she would yell."

It was hard to find a good answer to that. Mostly because it was probably true, and they both knew it well. No lie, even the sweetest one, uttered with the purest intentions, could change that, and the only real consolation had a bitter, unpleasant aftertaste.

"She's not here now."

Tommy's chin trembled slightly, but then he shook his head and, taking a deep breath, smiled slightly.

"I know. But sometimes..." He clutching the pillow tighter. "I still miss her sometimes. Even if she wasn't nice and wouldn't be glad to see me."

Techno wasn't good at comforting. In fact, he was hopeless at it, and he knew it himself. If someone tried to cheer him up by stroking his back awkwardly and hummed in understanding, he would most likely order them to fuck off before they engulfed him enough to give them a kick goodbye. But Tommy was clearly much lower in his standards, accepting the gesture as gratefully as if no one had ever done anything nice for him before, then suddenly moved closer and nestled tightly against him, hiding his face in his shirt.

Techno swallowed, hugging him back.

"There's nothing wrong with that, you know? Missing her."

The child squeezed his hands a little tighter.

"Is it possible to stop somehow?"

He rested his chin against the child's hair, closing his eyes for a moment. He wondered if this was what Phil felt, holding them in his arms whenever they remembered something terrible. If he felt so damn helpless and angry with himself that he didn't know any magic solution.

"I don't know," he sighed. "I guess... I guess you just have to wait."

He looked down at his hand frozen on the boy's back, and slowly, a little awkwardly, ran his fingers up and down. And then a second time and again, tracing the letters he had learned to recognize years ago. "U" almost identical to "O", "E", which could be mistaken for "L"...

"You know Phil would never hurt you, right?"

Tommy must have fallen asleep by now, because he flinched, and when he raised his head he had to blink a few times before he could keep his eyes open.

"Yhm." He nodded, though he didn't seem very sure about it. And as if to confirm this, he hesitated immediately. "But... Because before that, Phil was just Phil. And now he's my dad." He frowned. "I never had a dad. I don't know how they are."

Techno really wanted to find it so silly as to be funny. He very much wanted to sincerely laugh at this childish fear, as absurd as it was unfounded. In a world where he could do it, where he could say he didn't understand, his head was surely a much, much calmer place.

But he had been in the same situation once, he himself was a child who had just learned that he could really trust someone, and any change, no matter how good, still felt like a threat. It was easy to care for someone who only appeared in our lives for a moment. It was easy to find strength and patience for a week, a month, a year. It was easy to love someone without

having any expectations and demands on him. Phil might feel sorry for him and pity him, but Techno wasn't sure it wouldn't change when he officially became his son. When 'for a moment' begins to drag on. When Phil stopped being just a foster parent, and no one would admire him for his good heart and dedication anymore, but judge him for not being able to raise them 'better'.

Quietly, despite the slowly growing hope in him, he waited for the moment when it turned out that he was in fact not made for a real family.

But the only thing that changed over time was his name on the documents. Phil remained himself, patient and painfully understanding. And Techno remained his child, no matter how many stupid mistakes he made along the way.

Tommy was going to find out for himself, in a day, in a week, maybe in a month. But it certainly didn't hurt to assure him of it now.

"Phil's the best one." Techno smiled, trying to put all his confidence into these words. "Trust me, I had way too many 'fathers'."

The boy seemed to want to ask something else, but he didn't have time, because the door squeaked softly and Wilbur entered the room, leaving a narrow gap.

"Move over." He demanded immediately, nudging Techno in the back and immediately grabbing most of the duvet. "And move your legs, your feet are cold."

Techno, as befits an older brother, immediately turned so that he could put his feet straight against Wilbur's hot back.

"You were eavesdropping," he pointed out, softly enough for Tommy not to hear. Though he might as well have made it loud, because his brother, as always, had no shame.

"You have no evidence," he said, making himself more comfortable. He yawned widely, which, of course, immediately followed a series of yawns from everyone else. "If anyone wakes me up again, I'll kill them. Good night, Tommy."

The kid, squeezed between them like filling in a pancake, purred in response.

"Good night, Wilby." He yawned widely, already balancing on the verge of sleep. "Good night, Techie..."

Techno opened his eyes immediately, staring at him in mute shock, but the boy was already asleep for good. Wilbur, on the other hand, looked all too alert and mouthed 'Techie' with such a happy face as if he had just discovered a new game. Or rather, a torture. Techno glared at him, but it didn't do much, especially since he didn't know how to put his heart into it. After all, his whole life struggled with stupid names, the next one didn't make that much difference...

Techno didn't like being caring. He didn't like to focus on protecting others, not when all his instincts had always told him to run away and not look back. He didn't like to worry and take on someone else's problems when he could barely deal with his own.

Unfortunately, against his own will - he had clear tendencies to do so.

He could forgive himself for giving up to Wilbur so easily. His brother was just completely unfit to survive on his own, too trusting and stubborn for his own good. Besides, Techno really believed that he didn't have much to say about it, just as a cat brought from a cold street has no way to refuse a warm shelter. It was nice to finally feel wanted, it was nice to have someone close, it was nice to dare to call someone 'brother' and not regret it a second later.

He had never even considered trusting Phil at first, not really. An adult who gives a lot and promises even more sounded like a trap in which he was absolutely not going to get caught. Of the two bad things, he preferred homes where everyone openly despised him to families pretending to be friendly and helpful at first, only to lose all kindness and forbearance in a second when he did something wrong. Disappointment time and time again could be much more painful than admitting to himself that he obviously deserved nothing better.

But Phil was stubborn, with his kind words and affectionate gestures, with the promises he kept, with the support and understanding from which it was hard to run away. Especially when Techno needed them so badly and waited so long for them that he gave up, despite everything that experience had taught him.

Tommy... Tommy was different. He appeared out of nowhere, different from what everyone expected, and almost immediately filled a void that no one had even realized was there before. Techno didn't like change. Especially when it concerned his family. He didn't need anyone new, he didn't need another brother to get out of trouble and watch in the cafeteria to see if he was eating his breakfast, or make a place for in his bed when a bad dream turned out to be a bit too real to deal with alone. He didn't need another Phil who forgot sometimes that he was only human too, and needed reminders that he should get some sleep now and then. Two people is more than he ever expected to have. He was absolutely sure that he wouldn't have enough strength or feelings for the next one.

And yet somehow, with each passing day, he found his heart softening more and more at the sight of the radiant smile of the child, that it was easier for him to just hear his laugh and smile too, that he didn't mind being called 'Techie', even if the boy he blushed every time and immediately denied having called him that. Maybe he just liked feeling important. Maybe he liked being a big brother, needed and wiser, the kind people ran to with every problem. The kind he never got the opportunity to be.

And maybe, although he would never admit it out loud, he was really glad that the little raccoon had found his way into their basement.

Even though it was a little hard to remember when the same raccoon was jumping around on his bed and shouting out random words to get his attention and make it as difficult for him to talk on the phone as possible.

"Can't you shut him up somehow?" Dream finally lost his patience the third time he had to repeat the same sentence. "Tell him he's a pain in the ass."

Techno, just getting up to actually force the boy to the door, froze for a second and frowned.

"Hey, don't talk about my brother like that," he huffed, holding the phone with his arm to catch the bouncing boy around his waist and, amidst yells, screams and kicks, carried him out into the hallway. "Tommy, leave. I'm busy and you're annoying," he grunted, keeping the kid safely away so he could close the door before he hurriedly backed away and turned the key in the lock. "Okay, I'm back," he breathed, completely ignoring the way the doorknob bounced up and down rhythmically, pulled from the other side. All he could hear on the phone was silence. "Hey, Dream. Are you there?"

"Are you fucking kidding me now?" Dream sounded like he was having a hard time swallowing all his indignation, and he was almost choking on it. "You broke my arm because I called him your brother!"

Techno hesitated, genuinely embarrassed, but finally cleared his throat as if nothing happened:

"That was a long time ago."

Dream didn't seem to share his approach. Perhaps because it was only a few days earlier that he had been stripped of his plaster and he couldn't scratch himself without the use of a hanger.

"Like shit it was!" He growled, but when Techno was beginning to consider whether or not he was quite seriously angry, he added, "You're lucky it made George see how cool I am."

Ah, okay. Everything's okay.

"He just took pity on you," he said indifferently, falling back on the bed. "Weakness inspire sympathy."

"My lawyer will hear about this."

Techno wouldn't be able to care about this threat even if it hadn't been spoken in a jocular tone full of artificial resentment. Even if the entire jury knocked on his door, he could only order them to come a little later, because at the moment no one in the house had any time or willingness to deal with anything other than the upcoming holidays.

Phil was having the best time of his life. He taught Tommy to glue colored chains out of paper, nearly fell off the ladder twice while hanging the porch lights, and played Christmas carols from morning to night, even when Wilbur threatened to pierce his ears with a fork at dinner, and Tommy was eager to follow suit. Techno felt a bit sorry for the latter, because he

was chosen as the main victim and even if he denied, the magic of Christmas was to be forced into him.

"Have you been good this year?" Phil asked as all four were working on cutting gingerbread from the dough. Though, in truth, Techno and Wilbur mostly took care of picking up the molds, sprinkling flour and kicking each other under the table.

Phil had just taken the first batch of baked cookies out of the oven, and Tommy immediately lunged to take for himself those few gingerbread men which Wilbur had not cut off the head or any limbs. Only after putting them on the plate (and burning his fingers) and covering them with a cloth for safety, did he think for a moment and nodded solemnly.

"Very good," he said, licking his fingers and reaching for tubes of colored frosting. Wilbur immediately turned to point out once more that he needed blue for his army of dead soldiers. Techno used the moment to steal his star-shaped cookie cutter.

Meanwhile, Phil brushed the torment off his hands and crouched down in front of the child, smiling a little teasingly.

"For sure?" He raised his eyebrows, pretending he had serious problems believing it. Techno wasn't surprised at all. Personally, he was of the opinion that both of his brothers were little monsters and deserved mostly a good kick. But he didn't say it out loud, fortunately, because Tommy rocked on his heels and said with utter conviction:

"Yes. If I wasn't, you would have given me to someone. But you didn't, so I was good."

Phil's smile faded for a moment, but then it was replaced by a slightly sadder, more forced version.

"We'll talk about that later, okay? But yes, you were good." He moved a little closer, leaning towards the boy and lowering his voice as if revealing a secret to him. "Do you know who comes to good children at Christmas?"

Tommy frowned as he glanced at his brothers for help.

"We're gonna have guests?"

Phil laughed and tapped his finger on the boy's nose to get all his attention back to himself.

"Not exactly. He's a very special someone who flies a magic sleigh at night and has a bag of gifts with him." He smiled even wider, raising his eyebrows as the child continued to stare at him without any comprehension. "Let me tell you that he also likes red a lot."

Techno exchanged knowing looks with his brother, and the two almost simultaneously rolled their eyes. Years ago, Phil had tried the same trick with them, naively believing that after almost all their childhood wandering from one nightmare family to another, after another Christmas Eve spent feeling as unwanted redundant at the table, either of them kept in at least the element of faith in flying reindeer. Techno, personally, had never believed in them - no one had mentioned them to him. Wilbur said that for two or three years, he was sure that he

had simply done too many bad things to deserve a gift thrown down the chimney, which was perhaps even sadder. Phil, at least, looked like his heart broke. No wonder then that when Tommy came within range, much younger and more inclined to believe in fairy tales, he immediately tried his luck a third time.

The child blinked in confusion, then wrinkled his nose.

"Santa Claus?" He asked carefully, as if expecting him to be the victim of a joke.

Phil must not have felt the uncertainty because he just nodded his head, beaming.

"Yhm. Exactly." He put his arms around Tommy and stood up. "We don't have a fireplace, but that's alright. He knows special spells, so he'll be able to shrink and squeeze through the keyhole."

The boy's eyebrows rose so high that they almost disappeared under his fringe.

"Can't he just open the door?" He asked, quite intelligently for his abilities, but all common sense was immediately dismissed with a wave of his hand.

"But where is the magic and the fun in it?"

Tommy tilted his head, deeply considering something, then placed both hands on Phil's cheeks and narrowed his eyes as if trying to see through him and peer into his soul.

"You think Santa will bring us gifts?" He asked and immediately got a very enthusiastic answer.

"Yes, of course. He does every year. Right, boys?"

Techno just held up a thumb, completely uninterested in lying to six-year-olds. Wilbur, on the other hand, propped his chin with his elbow, sighing dramatically.

"He could bring more..."

Phil gave him a scolding look.

"He couldn't," he said firmly. "He pampers you more than any other child in the world."

Wilbur made a face as if he wanted to argue with it, but he didn't have time, because Tommy suddenly grinned, as if someone had suddenly turned on a little light in his head, and, placing his hands on Phil's cheeks again, he turned his face towards himself.

"Can we make a place for him in the yard?" He asked, already waving his legs to show that he wanted to return to earth immediately to carry out his gremlins' plans. "Oh, oh! And hang the lights so he knows where to land the sleigh! And we should leave some hay, or the reindeer will eat our potatoes. It would be a pity, because now they are growing bigger and red."

Techno leaned over the table so that he could whisper in his brother's ear amid the children's chatter:

"Should we tell him?"

Wilbur looked at him as if he seriously doubted his sanity.

"Are you crazy?" He whispered back. "Break it up and dad turns you into feed for those reindeer. Anyway..." He glanced at Tommy, choosing which gingerbread men are the prettiest and must be on the plate for Santa Claus. "Come on, look at them. Let them be happy."

So Techno, despite the goddamn great temptation, kept his mouth shut. Even if that meant that for the next two days he had to listen to every possible version of the toy-maker fairy tale, watch his garden beds turn into a lighted runway, and watch "Rudolph the Red Nose" twenty-four hours a day. After the fourth re-watch, he was able to name the reindeer in the horse-drawn sleigh himself, in the correct order. On the sixth, he threatened to throw the TV out the window. At eight he accepted his fate and even concluded that it could be worse. Tommy could always get obsessed with Elza.

In all the confusion, amidst the gleam of ornaments and the smell of cookies, amid the laughter and disputes that there was absolutely no force in the universe that would force him to put on plastic horns, he completely missed when the next few days went by. In fact, as he sat on the couch on Christmas Eve, under a warm blanket and with a mug of hot chocolate in his hands, he was beginning to regret that it would all be over soon and the charm would be gone. Tommy was just finishing up his first signature guitar solo, filling the house with a little fake tune. Wilbur corrected his finger alignment time and again, keeping one hand between the floor and his precious equipment to stop him from falling, but he didn't even try to hide his proud smile.

"Catch a little higher," he instructed, nodding his head to the beat. "Yes, exactly. Great. Just don't drop it!"

Phil leaned his head back in the chair, closing his eyes. He looked a lot better since he started to sleep longer and cut back on the amount of coffee he drank, but in recent days he seemed especially relaxed and content with life.

"Okay, little shits, that's it." He straightened suddenly and tapped his hands on his thighs. "It's time to go to bed."

Tommy groaned loudly, throwing his back on the couch and pressing the guitar tightly to his chest.

"One moment more!" He asked, swinging his legs in the air. "Five minutes!"

"No." Phil leaned over him, unraveling his fingers on the guitar and carefully handing it to Wilbur. "Five minutes was half an hour ago."

"Well, two minutes!"

"Not even one."

"Half! Half a minute!"

"Tommy..." Phil crossed his arms, raising an eyebrow. "Santa isn't coming until everyone is asleep, so I'd be marching to bed if I were you."

The child grimaced as he slowly, in a snail's pace, moved from the couch to the floor.

"I can't go," he said stubbornly. "I have no strength. And my legs don't work."

As if in evidence, he lifted his foot and dropped it immediately, spreading his arms helplessly and making a pained face.

"Tommy..." Phil shook his head, giving the child a moment to think if he really wanted to challenge him, and when there was no answer, he rolled up his shirt sleeves in two movements. "Okay, so be it."

He grabbed the boy around the waist and, ignoring his squeals, lifted him off the floor, turning him upside down in the air.

"Nooo..." Tommy squirmed, his legs kicking in all directions, gripping hard at the arm around him. "Daaad...!"

"Shut! I can't hear you at all. You don't have the right to speech after ten o'clock."

The child puffed up his cheeks, but made no more efforts to fight back as he was carried up the stairs, swaying lightly to the rhythm of the footsteps. He looked as if he had just decided to become the greatest villain in the world just to get revenge on all the parents of the world, but for now, unfortunately, he had to limit himself to whining and remembering every five minutes that he must use the toilet for the eighth time in a row. Techno really admired the patience with which Phil brought him to the room over and over again - personally he would have tied the kid to the bed a long time ago and turned the TV volume up so he wouldn't hear screams. But he had a silent suspicion that no one but himself would consider it an appropriate parenting method.

It was another hour before Tommy finally fell asleep, with the duvet tangled around his feet and half over the edge of the mattress, and another before Techno had promised to turn off the light, too, and went smoothly to reading under the blanket, flashlight in one hand and book in the other. The house was quiet, the light of the lamps surrounding the house shining through the window illuminating the room with a pale glow, and soon even he felt like sleeping. He buried himself in the sheets, with a pleasant vision of the morning with gifts under his eyelids, and was already one foot out of reality when something pulled him back abruptly. He opened his eyes, at first not fully comprehending where he was, but then the sound repeated, a rumble coming from below, and then footsteps, slow and snapping, as if someone were walking through the middle of a puddle.

Techno has once heard that people who have cats at home sleep much more peacefully, because they attribute every disturbing noise in advance to their pets. Living with Tommy

had a very similar effect. Ultimately, what was more likely: that someone thought the house of a single father of three was worth robbing, or that the little one had just climbed out of bed and was rummaging in the living room looking for presents?

He got out of bed very reluctantly, thinking that it had happened to him far too often lately, and without reaching even for the blanket as softly as he could, he opened the door a crack and ran down the corridor. Partly to not wake anyone else up, partly to give the gremlin a well-deserved heart attack. But as soon as he reached halfway up the stairs and leaned over the railing to look down, he himself froze, taken aback by the sight.

Tommy was standing in the center of the living room, in the half-melted snow, in Phil's oversized boots, wet and muddy, and as if nothing had happened, eating the Santa cookies he decorated with such zeal. As soon as he swallowed the leg of the last gingerbread man, he scooped up the crumbs from the plate with his finger and washed it down with milk, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. He looked down at the puddle forming, and nodded contentedly, turning to wobble staggeringly towards the Christmas tree. His hair waved slightly and it was only then that Techno realized that the window was ajar, icy air was pouring in, and someone's probably very small hands had busily picked up all the snow from the sill. Only this sobered him up to the point that, no longer bothering to be quiet, he ran down the stairs, jumping two steps at a time.

Tommy jumped at the sight of him, swayed, and at the last moment covered his mouth to keep from screaming as he landed with his back on the floor. Techno leapt over him in one leap, catching the window and closing it tightly as silently as possible. Phil was content with one family anecdote about running away, another could be too much of a burden on his heart.

"What the hell are you doing?" He hissed, turning to the boy and grabbing his arm, lifting him to stand up with one jerk. "Are you stupid?"

He shook him lightly, trying very hard to keep his nerves in check, but it was extremely difficult when Tommy looked at him almost resentfully and put his finger to his mouth, making the loudest "shhh" Techno had ever heard.

"Be quiet," he scolded, as if he hadn't been stomping around. "Some people want to sleep, you know?"

If Techno had been a little less shocked, he would probably have smacked him for that tone. Luckily for the kid, he was temporarily blown away by the level of insolence.

"Well, not you, from what I can see," he growled as he finally recovered. He was still squeezing the boy's arm, but his fingers relaxed a little. "What are you doing?"

Tommy rocked on his heels, which looked a bit funny because the toes of the boots, gigantic on his feet, didn't even lift off the floor. He looked around alertly before leaning forward, putting his hands to his mouth and whispering dramatically:

"I'm leaving traces."

Techno waited for a moment for some continuation, something sensible, but the child seemed to think the matter was solved, as if nothing had ever happened, returned to taking carefully measured, muddy steps.

"Well, I can see that for myself." Techno tugged him lightly, and when that didn't work, he tugged a little harder. "You'll make the carpet dirty." He lost all his patience and grabbed the boy in two, lifting him up. "Come here."

The boy squealed softly, swinging his legs so that one shoe flopped to the floor and the other flew a good meter and hit the Christmas tree. The tree shook dangerously and a handful of needles fell to the floor.

"Let me go!" Tommy started scratching his arm around him, but Techno just slapped his hands for it.

"If you tell me what you're up to." He pointed out, grabbing the kid by the ankles as he kicked his knee. They struggled for a long time, making far more noise than they should have, until finally Tommy, pressed face down to the couch, his brother's knee on his back, gave one last jerk and squealed sadly, like a kicked puppy.

"Because..." He took a deep, dangerously teary breath. "Well, because Phil believes in Santa Claus," he blurted out in one breath.

Techno froze, then slowly drew his leg back and pulled away, letting the boy jump up and scurry to the farthest corner possible on the couch.

"What?" He asked, convinced he must have misunderstood something, but Tommy just nodded vigorously.

"He does! He showed me pictures and told me about reindeer and elves and that they fly... Reindeers, not elves," he clarified. "And he was telling me all the time that Santa would come today and leave us presents and he was so happy and it was a pity to tell him that it was just a fairy tale and that Santa doesn't exist. And he would be sad if he saw in the morning that no one had eaten the cookies, and I don't like when he's sad. So I'm leaving traces!" He jumped off the mattress and ran across the room, picking up both shoes to pick up triumphantly as evidence in the case. "But that's not a lie at all. Because if you're lying and someone is happy about it, that doesn't count! Like when Wilbur asks if I like his toast."

Techno looked at him, at the shoes, at the wet marks and crumbs on the carpet - and concluded that he must have actually stayed in bed after all, and it was all a very bizarre dream.

"Nobody likes Wilbur's toast," he replied quite automatically, still processing what he had just heard. Then he blinked and shook his head to break out of his thoughts. He frowned. "You're pretending to be Santa and dirtying the floor to make Phil think that Santa is real?" He asked to dispel all doubts. And the gods knew he had a lot of them.

Tommy stopped smiling and slowly lowered his hands. More water dripped from the shoes onto the carpet.

"But you knew Santa isn't real, right?" He asked quietly, almost in horror, and Techno suddenly realized that even if he wanted to, even if he tried very, very hard, he wouldn't know how to be angry with him. Probably never again in my life, but especially not at this particular moment.

Because there was something damn endearing about how much Tommy cared about everyone around him. Something wonderfully childish about his reasoning and ideas and finding a cure for all the evil of this world in the simplest of ways. Something innocent that he didn't even consider for a moment that Phil might be trying to lie to him.

"Tommy..." he began, but eventually changed his mind and just sighed heavily, shaking his head. Some feelings were better kept to oneself. "Go wake Wilbur," he ordered instead, holding out his hands. "Nobody's better at making a mess than him."

Tommy quickly handed over his shoes and very eagerly made his way up the stairs, but stopped, hand on the railing.

"But does he know that Santa isn't real?" he asked, still worried.

Techno held his breath for a moment and closed his eyes.

"Just go."

Regardless of how weird it was to make a mess on purpose and, in addition, sincerely with good intentions, Techno thought they had done quite well. Especially Wilbur, who at the end was a bit fanciful and only after a long persuasion and a strong smack on the back of the head did he become convinced that knocking over the Christmas tree was a gross exaggeration, regardless of his 'artistic vision'. Tommy seemed more than pleased when he had made sure five times that the shoe prints were 'good enough' and 'exactly as dad imagined it'. Techno was one hundred percent sure that their father would be happier to have a clean living room, but he kept the thought to himself and focused on herding the child back to bed, where he belongs at one in the morning.

He only succeeded after he had made a three-time promise that they wouldn't start the celebration without him, which turned out to be completely irrelevant, because the boy was up again at seven in the morning and was running from door to door, knocking on each for as long as eventually he pulled everyone out of their beds.

Wilbur had pulled Phil aside in time and whispered to him why he shouldn't have had a heart attack after he went downstairs, so the mess in the living room was received with due enthusiasm (and only a little bit of the fatigue of someone having to clean it all up).

"Oooh...! Tommy, look!" Phil carefully picked up the cookie plate like the most holy relic, smiling so brightly that if Techno hadn't known him a little better, he would have believed him himself. "And there are traces! Honestly, he could have wiped his shoes, but what to expect from someone who lives with reindeer... See?" He crouched down in front of the child and waited patiently for it to stop bouncing in place before tapping his nose with his finger. "I told you Santa was coming. It looks like you guys were all good after all."

Techno chose to remain silent on the subject, as befits someone who had nothing to boast about, but Wilbur apparently took it as his moment to shine.

"Well, I'm always good."

Phil gave him a pointed look from under raised eyebrows before leaning over to Tommy, lowering his voice a little.

"Let me tell you in secret: I think if it weren't for you, everyone here would have gotten coal."

Tommy flushed with pride, straightening up and lifting his chin up high. Wilbur stuck his tongue out at him, but even he couldn't hold back a smile for long. Even if there was actually only kindling for the fireplace waiting for them under the tree (which they didn't even have anyway), it would still be better than any Christmas before meeting Phil. But the awareness that some of the carefully wrapped, colorful gifts are intended for him definitely didn't bother him. In fact, while Techno would never admit it out loud, he was very eager to start tearing the paper off himself, and held back only for the sake of being very mature and not a bit childish like Tommy.

"But quickly..." the boy groaned, hanging himself with his full weight on Phil's shoulder as he tried to calmly prepare coffee and hot chocolate. "I want to know what I got! Now!"

Phil didn't answer, but Techno could have sworn he smiled a little wickedly and slowed his movements even further.

When all the cups finally hit the table, Tommy was so impatient that at the first sign he practically threw himself towards the poor tree and almost knocked it over with the stand.

"This one is for me!" He rejoiced after a few seconds of squinting his eyes over the letters written on the felt-tip pen. He set the package aside, carefully and almost reverently, before grabbing the next one. "Oh. And this one is for Techno!"

He tossed the package towards the couch, from which Techno had to lean out to prevent the gift from hitting the floor in time.

"Hope you didn't give us anything glass," he joked, watching the child shake the package before tossing it at Wilbur.

Phil sighed heavily, but it was hard not to notice that he was amused himself.

"Let's say I'm glad I saved one of the gifts for later."

Techno raised his eyebrows and was about to ask, but Wilbur was just throwing a ball of colored paper at him, which effectively distracted him.

"Oh, oh!" Tommy jumped in place, digging from the pile of parcels something small, wrapped in a piece of notebook paper, painted with felt-tip pens. "And this one is for you!" He ran over to Phil, holding out his hands. He didn't pull them away when the package was

taken, so after a second of confusion, Phil pulled him onto his lap. "Open now! Because it's from me."

Techno stopped trying to strangle one brother for a moment and looked at the other one, a bit surprised by the sudden twinge of nostalgia. Wilbur slowly lowered his shoulders, too, and smiled fondly, though not half as radiant as Phil's.

The gift turned out to be pasta. Painted with paints and strung on thick yarn it looked more than ridiculous, but no one would ever bring up to say it out loud. Wilbur merely raised his eyebrows and turned away, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"My things were so nasty too?"

Techno glanced over his shoulder at the blue cones that still disfigured the living room.

"I don't want to worry you, but compared to you, Tommy has a real talent," he snorted, for which he immediately earned a completely undeserved kick. Honesty was never appreciated in their home, indeed.

Phil, meanwhile, turned the 'necklace' in his hands as carefully as if he were holding real jewels.

"Did you do it yourself?" He said, unnecessarily, because no self-respecting shop would ever put something like this up for sale.

Tommy nodded vigorously.

"Yes! It will match your bracelet. Because it's green too."

"Ooh... Very clever," Phil said, completely ignoring the expression his eldest child made at the comparison. And then he took the boy's face in his hands, staring at him with genuine tenderness for a moment before he leaned in, touching his forehead against his. "Thank you. It's very pretty. I'll definitely wear it."

Techno sincerely hoped he's going to do it only at home. Most of his friends' parents found Phil a bit strange anyway, he really didn't have to worsen that opinion even more. Though it might be worth it, if only for Tommy's smile alone.

"Okay, it's my turn now!" Wilbur slipped off the couch and walked to the Christmas tree on all fours, knocking over the packages for a moment before finding the right one, flat and rectangular, with a disproportionately large bow. He handed it to his dad, and immediately sat down comfortably on the floor, head resting on Phil's lap.

Phil looked at the gift uncertainly, probably trying to x-ray the paper and make sure the entire couch wasn't drowning in the glitter at any moment before he slowly started unpacking. He raised his eyebrows and looked down at his son, then back at the scroll of pages in his hand, and his lips twitched in a restrained smile.

"A voucher for a free house vacuum," he announced with theatrical delight. "Wow. Very generous. Oh, and for washing the dishes." He flipped another page. "And even dusting!"

Awesome. I guess all your chores are here. Which you have to do anyway." He leaned out to lightly smack his son on the head with a bundle of pages. "How kind of you to have it in writing now."

Wilbur, completely unfazed, smiled innocently.

"I gave you a few for free hugs." He pulled out a page of a slightly brighter color from the very bottom. "Because you're so clingy."

Phil rolled his eyes.

"Mhm... of course," he snorted, but then his face softened and he laughed, holding Tommy with one arm so that his other hand ran through his son's hair. Wilbur immediately bowed his head, closing his eyes, as befits someone who absolutely dislikes physical contact and needs, literally, a special invitation. Immediately, however, he jumped up from the floor and trotted again to the Christmas tree.

"I have one more!" He announced proudly, tossing the long, cylindrical package from hand to hand.

Phil glared at him, probably not quite sure he wanted to know what could be better than a pot washing coupon, but with Tommy's eager help, tore the paper open.

"Very funny," he said, as he pulled a wooden, nicely decorated cane from the roll. He scowled at it as if it had done him great harm, and then, with no less offense, at Wilbur.

Wilbur just rocked on his heels, grinning from ear to ear.

"It's because you're old," he explained helpfully, finding it necessary to drive the pin even deeper.

Phil tossed the cane in his hand, pointing the tip straight at his son's chest.

"You better be careful that I don't beat you with this stick," he threatened.

Wilbur inhaled sharply, putting his hand to his heart.

"You would never! You know I'm too traumatized for this." He flung his hair, sighed softly. "And you don't have a coupon for that."

Phil didn't look like he cared about any kind of written permission. But since he was himself, far too soft and easy to manipulate, after a while he set his cane back against the couch and stretched out his arms, gesturing for the boy to come closer.

"You're a goddamn gremlin, you know that?" He sneered, ruffling his hair.

"I know." Wilbur nodded, way too smug. But immediately he hesitated, and his smile faded slightly. "Buuut, you love me anyway?"

It sounded much more like a question, quiet and uncertain, as if suddenly a shadow of sincere sadness pierced from beneath all the mirth. Maybe that's why Phil's hands trembled slightly as he pulled him close, pressing him against his chest as if he wanted to chase away all bad thoughts and memories with one hug.

"The most in the world," he assured, kissing the top of his disheveled hair. "And I like you very, very much."

Wilbur stepped back to meet his eyes.

"No one can dislike me" he replied, again in the same, joking tone, and suddenly everything was again exactly as it should be, and Techno could breathe again, calmed down.

Tommy, on the other hand, didn't seem to be the least bit moved by the whole scene. On the other hand, he was clearly impatient that no one had been paying attention to him for a good few minutes, which, as you know, was a terrible crime and needed a quick fix.

"Now me!" He decided, slipping off Phil's knees and squeezing past Wilbur on his way to the curved stalk that looked like a Christmas tree. "I have another one!"

He pulled out another very ecologically packed package, which he immediately shoved into Phil's hand, bouncing around waiting for a moment of truth and dramatically revealing the contents. Which turned out to be another noodle necklace.

"Oh." Phil blinked before he remembered that he should be enthusiastic. "Another one?"

"Yes!" Tommy nodded as he grabbed both necklaces and, standing on tiptoe, tugged Phil by the sleeve. He obediently lowered himself, letting the noodles hang around his neck. "And this one is red. Because red stuff is the best. And I like red, and I like you too, so it fits."

Techno could have sworn their father's eyes had gotten a little too glassy and wet for a moment.

"Oh," he gasped before he hastily cleared his throat and grinned. "I like you very, very much too, kiddo. But I think you should start opening your gifts."

He clearly wanted to give himself some time to cool down, but Techno had no intention of making it easy for him.

"Nope. Now me," he decided, standing up and reaching into his sweatshirt pocket to pull out a small rectangular cardboard box wrapped in a ribbon. He spent a good half an hour trying to tie the perfect bow and, in fact, remembering his brothers' gifts, he figured he could forgive himself. Still, he hesitated before handing the package to Phil. "Just..." His fingers tightened for a moment. "I didn't steal it," he pointed out. "Just saying."

Phil's smile slipped, replaced by anxiety.

"I'm not sure if I like this introduction..." he said, nervously brewing the box in his hand. Apparently, however, he still had some trust in his own children, for he allowed Tommy to pull the ribbon to help tear the paper apart, and even to remove the lid from the decorative

cardboard. Only then did he stop the boy with a hand movement and for a moment stared at the contents with wide eyes.

In a white padded box was a bracelet, gold, with a large green stone gleaming in the center.

"Techno-," he began, but the boy, prepared for the protests, immediately cut in on him.

"I helped Dream with his lessons," he explained, shifting slightly. "Kinda. I mean, I did it for him, but his parents think he's doing everything by himself, so everyone is happy." He shrugged. "They still think that he hit me first and I think they feel a bit sorry, because they really paid me well."

It was hard not to feel the note of pride in his voice, which he wasn't trying to hide. He liked being enterprising almost as much as Dream liked getting good grades for essays he hadn't even read. He had slight doubts as to whether the teachers would appreciate the genius of their cooperation. They would probably have a few comments about its 'moral' side. And Phil probably too, judging by the expression he made for the second before he remembered that for the moment he was literally holding something far more important than a potential student suspension.

"Techno, I can't-"

"I won't buy you anything next year." He suggested hastily, seeing that it didn't have much effect, he added: "Nor in two years. And you'll only get half a birthday present," he tried to joke, but he knew it was a little weak. He bit the inside of his cheek. "Please." He tried a different, more honest and desperate side. "I really wanted you to have it."

Phil's face softened instantly.

"This one is fine," he said, raising his hand, the wrist still holding the green-painted pebble.

Techno winced at the comparison, but then looked down, nervously tugging on the sleeves of his sweatshirt.

"Yeah, but..." He took a lot of breath, but finally just let it out slowly. "You'll laugh."

"You know I won't."

"But Wilbur will."

Phil nodded.

"Yes, probably. He's Wilbur."

Techno huffed, but relaxed a bit as he tried again to find the right words.

"Because the old one is... childish. Well, because I gave it to you when I was little, so it makes sense, but I wanted to..." His fingers tightened on his sleeves, swallowing. He was never good at talking about feelings, and the harder he tried, the harder it was for him. "I

wanted you to know that even when I'll be actually an adult and all, I will still care. And you'll still be my dad and I will love you and everything..."

He almost whispered the last words, lowering his voice more and more, feeling his cheeks begin to burn. And it didn't help at all that when he fell silent, the living room went completely silent, as if everything froze with him for a moment, waiting for a reaction. He wasn't sure what he wanted to hear exactly, he just knew that he was looking for it with his whole body, that if he didn't get it, wouldn't hear it, he would always be disappointed in some way. Maybe it was about reassuring him that he was right. Maybe to be sure that his feelings are mutual. Maybe the fact that even in a few or a dozen years, when he actually grows up, this house will still remain his home. That even then he would remain Phil's son, regardless of the fact that he was never and never will be the perfect child.

He felt a tug on his sleeve and instinctively lifted his head to look at Tommy.

"Techie." The boy tugged again, as if trying to wake him up. "Techie, dad's crying."

As if on cue, Phil sniffed loudly and hurriedly wiped his cheeks with his hands, taking a quick, shallow breath.

"I'm fine," he said, blinking back tears.

Wilbur immediately sat down next to him and handed him a tissue. Tommy didn't want to be worse, so he immediately appeared on the other side, digging through his pockets, and when he found nothing in any of them, he pulled his sleeve over his hand and held it under Phil's nose.

"You should have given him a necklace." He said, looking at Techno with superiority. "He didn't cry because of the necklace."

Phil laughed, refusing to take advantage of the tempting offer of sniffing his clothes, but squeezing the boy's hand lightly.

"I'm crying because I'm happy," he explained before turning around and reaching out with his other hand to his eldest son. Techno didn't hesitate a second before he grabbed it, letting him pull him into an embrace. And if he himself hugged his father a little too tightly, too desperately - it was only a secret between them.

"Thank you." Phil pushed him slightly away from him and Techno very reluctantly loosened his grip. He didn't really have time to be angry about it, as soon a warm hand rested on his cheek, and their foreheads touched each other. "For what you said. And for the bracelet too."

And by some miracle of all the words in the world, these just turned out to be right. Especially whispered a moment later, "I love you too".

"And I still think my gift is the best," Tommy judged, his habit of interfering as soon as he felt a little too forgotten. Techno would have smacked him for that, really, but the child had stepped back in time and stuck out his tongue at him. And then suddenly he straightened up

and with a dramatic "Ah!", ran to the Christmas tree, and after a while he returned with one more, small package. "I have one more! I just forgot."

The world would not lose much if it forgot forever, because the gift turned out to be another, this time a blue, pasta necklace.

"We won't have anything to eat soon," Techno commented as Phil allowed their potential dinner to be wrapped around his neck.

"Techno's just kidding," he said quickly as a hint of anxiety flashed across the child's face. "But you could have packed them all together, you know?"

Tommy wrinkled his nose, perhaps even offended by such an offer.

"But then you would only get one gift," he huffed, displaying a perfect knowledge of mathematics in terms of three. "And now you got three! I just wanted you to enjoy it more."

Wilbur made a loud 'toady' noise, but no one paid much attention to him. Especially Phil, who was so emotionally broken that he would probably be destroyed even by the fact that one of his sons was breathing towards him.

"Oh. Ooh, Tommy..." He squeezed the boy's cheeks, kissing his forehead. "It's very nice. Thank you."

The child looked at him expectantly, and when nothing else happened, he frowned.

"Aren't you gonna say you love me?" He demanded.

Techno concluded that he was completely unnecessarily afraid that Tommy might take his place in the family. Little shit skipped over it at full speed and jumped to the top of the hierarchy, taking the position of the favorite once and for all. The look Wilbur sent him told him that he was not alone in this belief.

Phil was silent for a moment, staring at the boy with wide, wet eyes before smiling, in that close to teary way.

"Of course I will." He hugged the kid tightly, rocking him gently. His voice was breaking, and each subsequent breath was more and more tearful, but he kept trying to pull himself together. "I couldn't forget it. I love you most in the world, no matter what. As much as I love these two gremlins."

Tommy rested his chin on his shoulder.

"And this is very much?"

"Very much."

Techno leaned towards his brother, lowering his voice a bit.

"He's bloody cunning after all," he assessed with genuine admiration. And then he slapped Wilbur on the back of the head, not lightly at all. - "It's definitely your fault."

Wilbur, though indignant at first, smiled aggressively.

"I told you I'd make a champion out of him," he replied proudly, as if he had actually done something hard, and damn important.

They unwrapped the rest of the presents in relative peace by Tommy's standards, running around the room and loudly announcing to the world how much he liked each thing he picked out of the papers. Techno watched him surreptitiously, feeling a strange pressure in his heart as he remembered the time when he had practically nothing himself, and every toy, book, every new piece of clothing, and even a stupid toothbrush seemed valuable if only because he could name it his own. It was easy to forget about it, with Phil who liked to pamper them in every way he could. Techno wanted to forget. He wanted to believe that his whole life had been as simple as it was now, that none of these ordinary, normal things had ever seemed strange and unusual to him, somewhere beyond his grasp.

"And I can talk to Tubbo?" Tommy said, turning the new tablet over in his hands, carefully covering the entire screen with his fingerprints. His eyes shone in the light of colored lights, and his disheveled hair wrapped around his reddened cheeks. "I'll be able to call him like an adult?"

"Only if his parents agree, yes." Phil nodded, but then frowned. "And if you do your homework first."

Tommy's smile faded slightly for a moment.

"But why?" He asked, tilting his head. "Now I've found Tubbo, so I don't need to be able to write."

Techno could have sworn that he could see in Phil's eyes a shadow of despair at the vision of several more years of his child's education.

"School doesn't just teach you to write, Tommy."

The boy wrinkled his nose and looked at him almost indignantly.

"Is there gonna be something else?" He puffed up his cheeks, but his eyes kept darting down to the tablet over and over again, which effectively prevented him from taking offense.

"Fine," he grunted finally. "But only because I really want to talk to Tubbo!"

He carefully put the tablet back in the box, touching the screen a little more to be sure, so that by any chance no piece was left clean, before he reached for the last packet with his name on it.

"Ah." Phil straightened and reached out, urging him to come closer. He pulled the boy onto his lap, pressing his back against his chest, resting his chin on the top of his pale hair. "This is... a special gift."

The kid's eyes widened and he twitched with excitement.

"Special?" He repeated, already tearing a corner of the paper.

"Yhm. So please try not to spill anything on it again."

Techno glanced sideways, exchanging a glance with Wilbur. They both knew that Tommy could be bloody self-destructive, but such a sabotage, even if unknowingly, neither of them expected.

Meanwhile, the child dealt with the packaging, opened the colorful wheelbarrow and looked through the pages just collected from it with a very focused expression, squinting and spelling the words under his breath.

"I won't read it!" He finally shifted, throwing his briefcase on the couch with a flourish. "It's homework! You can't give me homework on Christmas! It's illegal. And you'll get coal for that!"

Wilbur stopped smiling and rolled his eyes.

"They're adoption papers, you idiot," he snorted, throwing a ball of paper at the child. It hit the very center of the forehead, and the boy squealed as if it had been crushed by at least a ton of boulders.

Phil glanced from one to the other and sighed heavily.

"Wilbur." He gave his son a scolding look, but immediately focused all his attention on his younger child, tearing out of his embrace, probably to throw the whole Christmas tree at his brother as a rematch. "Tommy, listen." He sat the boy down beside him, turning so that he could look him straight in the eye. "I know that you haven't been with us long and that not everything has always been as good as it should be. And I know it's not an easy decision to make, and I understand if you need more time to think about it. No matter what you say, you can stay with us if you want. The offer will still be available when you feel ready." He smiled, probably trying to encourage himself mainly, because although his face was serious, his voice was a little broken, and his hands tightened on Tommy's fingers as if he needed it more now. "I'd like to adopt you, Tommy. I wish you were officially my son. A member of our family. But only if you want it yourself."

The room grew silent, as if the whole world had frozen in anticipation of the verdict. Techno found himself instinctively clamping a hand on his thigh to keep his knee from trembling. Wilbur ran his fingers nervously in the air as if he were tapping a tune. And only Tommy seemed completely unfazed, his face indifferent and his eyes fixed on Phil as if he were still waiting for something more.

Then he turned, looked at the folder he had left behind, and wrinkled his nose.

"So I don't have to read it?" He made sure as if that was what worried him the most about it all: having to read more than two sentences. When faced with a major life-long decision, it was important to choose your priorities.

Phil must have come to a similar conclusion, for though he nodded, he was looking at the boy as if it had suddenly grown two horns. Meanwhile, with obvious satisfaction, Tommy pushed the pages a little further, as if to be sure.

"Well that's good," he said, as if nothing had happened.

Phil opened his mouth, but said nothing, and after a long moment he closed it and leaned sideways against the back of the couch as if reality had just overwhelmed him.

"Tommy, do you understand what 'adoption' means?"

It wasn't a particularly wise question, but Techno could tell when someone was just running out of ideas, and he didn't deserve to be reproached for his desperation.

Meanwhile, as if nothing had happened, Tommy resumed spreading his fingers on the tablet screen.

"That you want me forever." He said without much concern. Then he looked up and made a face as if someone were trying to sell him last year's model for this year's price. "But that's no surprise."

Phil blinked and, this time, he was not alone in his amazement.

"It's not?"

"No." The boy shrugged, cheerfully swinging his legs in the air. "Because I knew right away that I would stay."

"Oh, really?"

"Mhm." He finally put the tablet down on his lap and grimaced slightly. "Only the first time, something didn't work out and you didn't understand it. And it was stupid because I did everything right!"

Phil took a deep breath and held it for a moment before he sighed aloud, reaching out to stroke the kid's hair.

"Of course you did," he said, almost tenderly. "You've never done anything wrong."

"Exactly!" Tommy jumped in place, his arms waving excitedly. "And I was good and kind and even called you 'dad' because Wilbur said you're weak and that would break you. I did everything!"

He nodded, admitting a holy and indisputable right, but no one paid much attention to it. Phil was just busy staring at the void as if he had hung up somewhere in the middle of processing these revelations, and Wilbur pressed his back a little tighter into the chair, trying to appear much smaller.

"Ah. Wilbur said that?" When Phil finally spoke, his voice seemed almost indifferent, but the look he gave his son might not only kill him, making death suddenly seem like a nicer option.

He reached for the cane leaning against the couch and weighed the wood in his hand. "I am beginning to see the potential of this gift..."

Wilbur curled his shoulders, suddenly much paler.

"I wanted to help," he muttered, fingering the hem of his pants.

Phil grimaced, shaking his head.

"I'm sure my therapist will hear about this," he muttered, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

Techno immediately used the moment of his inattention to punch his brother on the back of the head with all his might.

"For being an idiot," he hissed as the latter glared at him indignantly. He leaned in, lowering his voice so only he could hear. "It really made him cry."

Wilbur stopped making a face as if he considered himself the most harmed victim of the oppression of an unjust world, and hung his head, clearly ashamed. Techno immediately punched him again, so that he blew his nose into his own lap.

"And that's for calling me a 'traitor' afterward," he said, a little louder, because he still felt bloody hurt by it. "For no reason!"

Wilbur, covering the back of his head with his hands, moved away from him as far as he would be able to rest.

"Because you convinced dad that Tommy couldn't call him that!" He squeaked, lifting his leg to deliver a defensive kick if necessary.

Techno, already grabbing his ankle, froze for a moment before straightening up, electrocuted.

"No I didn't!"

Wilbur was already opening his mouth, probably to keep arguing, but something in his brother's face must have told him he was serious because he closed his mouth and slowly lowered his hands.

"You didn't?" He muttered, his arms hanging down. "But... Because you said you talked to him and I thought you hated Tommy and..." He paused, bit his lip, and leaned in resignedly. "Okay, one more time. I deserve it."

Techno could not be asked twice.

"Boys." Phil looked at them pointedly. "Enough of that."

Wilbur, usually the last one to obey any command, nodded his head very eagerly this time and moved as far as possible, still massaging the back of his head. Techno lowered his hand a lot less willingly, but finally, after giving his brother one more warning look, he started

unwrapping one of his last gifts, by far the largest of them all, rectangular, at least halfway down his thighs and as long as he was wide. .

"Oh." He blinked in surprise as most of the paper landed on the floor, revealing the metal bars of a large cage. "Oh," he repeated, his face serious as he turned to look at Tommy. "So? Will you come in on your own, or should I help you?"

The child's eyes widened in terror.

"No!" He squeaked, jumping away and clutching hard on Phil's shoulder. "No, I won't go in there!"

"It's okay, I'll help." Techno pretended to get up, and the room immediately filled with a screech on frequencies that could be heard even by whales.

"No! Daaad...! Techno said-!"

"Boys," Phil sighed heavily, shaking his head, but took the baby to him, his other hand stroking his hair. "Nobody will lock anyone in a cage." He looked at the older sons, suddenly serious. "Is that clear?"

Wilbur hummed with obvious disappointment. Tommy stuck his tongue out at them. Techno seriously considered if he could fit both in the cage at once.

"If I find out that any of you have even tried, I'll be really angry." Phil pointed at each one in turn, his eyes narrowing as he tried to look threatening. And then he instantly brightened and, gently pushing Tommy away, stood up, stretching his back as if he had at least run a marathon. "Wait a minute, I'll be right back."

Techno paid little attention to him, pulling the rest of the paper off the cage and turning it in all directions.

"What do I need it for?" He began, but suddenly he broke off and looked in horror at his last gift. He slid off the couch to the floor, pulling the package closer, and hurriedly tore the package open, opening the cardboard carton in one swift motion. Then he felt all the air escaping from him, replaced by a blissful relief when he saw only the books inside. "God!" He put a hand to his chest, still feeling his heart pound. "For a moment I thought you put there-"

He turned to call out to Phil how much he hated being exposed to a heart attack at such a young age, but fell silent again. This time, for a change, he could have sworn his heart had stopped for a good second.

Phil stood in the kitchen doorway, grinning broadly, holding a fluffy white pile of fur in his arms.

"I'm not a sadist," he joked, coming closer, and when Techno made no move, he himself knelt down in front of him. "Stretch out your hands. Yes, exactly. Watch out, he's a little scared."

Techno could say the same about himself when he held the trembling rabbit against his chest as gently as he could.

"He's so little..." he whispered, carefully running his fingers over long ears and then pulling his hand back as the animal shuddered even more.

Wilbur crouched behind his back, resting his chin on his shoulder to see better, and immediately began to dwell on the new household's high level of sweetness, but Techno could barely hear him, pressing the rabbit a little tighter to his chest.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said softly, drawing circles on one of his paws with his thumb. "Nobody's gonna do anything to you, I promise."

The animal either didn't hear him or didn't really believe him, because he could feel how hard his heart beats. It sped up even more when Tommy suddenly appeared beside him and began to stroke his head.

"I want a pet too!" He announced as Techno moved out of reach of his hands. "It's not fair! Wilbur has a fish and Techno has a rabbit, I want something too!"

"You have Tubbo," Wilbur snorted, and the boy grumbled instantly, puffing up his cheeks and folding his arms over his chest.

"Has he got a name?" Techno asked, completely ignoring the scuffles of his brothers. Phil shook his head. "Oh. Then let it be Fluff."

Somewhere behind his back Tommy insisted that 'Terminator' was a much more serious and better name, but he wasn't listening to him.

He looked up, finding Phil's gaze, and smiled before leaning down, resting his forehead on his shoulder.

"Thank you," he said softly as he found himself with a slightly uncomfortable hug, all the while making sure that the new pet didn't accidentally feel too claustrophobic.

Phil leaned in to kiss his head.

"You're welcome."

There were many reasons to say thanks. Of that one thing, Techno was absolutely sure as he sat on the couch for the rest of the morning, admonishing Tommy over and over that Fluff was not a toy, sipping hot chocolate and laughing at Wilbur's stupid jokes. He was sure of it when he and his brothers were building an igloo in the afternoon, which only knocked over on their heads twice as they pounded the snow and chased each other around the yard, completely unaffected by the cold as the warm house waited for them to return. He was sure of it when they looked at the Christmas tree in the park one more time in the evening, racing between the stalls and maneuvering among strangers. When, tired of an emotional day, they almost fell asleep on the way back, crammed into the three of them in the backseat of the car.

"Dad?" He muttered yet, somewhere on the verge of sleep and waking, wrapped in a duvet in his own warm bed. Phil paused in the doorway, hand on the doorknob, then turned and stepped back, perching on the edge of the mattress. "Thank you. Really."

And it wasn't just about Fluff dozing in his new cage. Not about any other gifts, not about the Christmas tree and decorations, not even about how happy he felt all day.

Techno never believed that he would ever feel truly safe. Really loved and accepted as part of the family, irreplaceable and necessary.

But when Phil squeezed his hand, the past felt distant and fuzzy, and the future a lot less terrible and lonely. Exactly as it should be.

For forever.

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